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ESSAY ON BURNS

BY
THOMAS CARLYLE

EDITED BY
GEORGE R. NOYES



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THOMAS CARLYLE

EDITED

WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY GEORGE R. NOYES



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INTRODUCTION.

CARLYLE'S *Essay on Burns* was first printed in the *Edinburgh Review* for December, 1828. Though in form a review of the *Life of Robert Burns*, by John Gibson Lockhart, it is really, like many of the articles in the *Edinburgh Review*, an entirely independent work. The present art of book reviewing is a creation of our own times. The English magazines of the eighteenth century were mere publishers' organs, and are inferior to even second-rate periodicals of our own day. The book notices in them are comparable to those that we see in our poorer daily newspapers. The reviewers were usually mere literary hacks, and were content to give a summary of the contents of a book, and then pass judgment on it as a whole, meting out praise or blame in set, formal terms. The foundation of the *Edinburgh Review*, in 1802, by Jeffrey, Sydney Smith, Brougham, and others, marks the beginning of a new era in English periodical literature. The new magazine had for contributors men of marked learning and originality, leaders in the thought of their time, who were not satisfied, in reviewing a book, with recording the impression that any sane man would gather from a casual reading, but took the title of the book as the text for a thoroughly original treatment of its subject. Succeeding periodicals, as the *Quarterly* and *Blackwood's*, however much they differed from the *Edinburgh* in politics and general tendencies, were all affected by its methods. So it happens that many book reviews in the English magazines, by men like Carlyle, Macaulay, and Matthew Arnold, have become permanent additions to literature, sometimes surpassing in interest the works that occasioned them.

In the present case, however, the book reviewed continues to be a standard authority. Its author, John Gibson Lockhart, was born in 1794, at Cambusnethan, about twelve miles southeast of Glasgow. When *Blackwood's Magazine* was founded, in 1817, Lockhart became one of its chief contributors. In 1820 he married the eldest daughter of Sir Walter Scott. In the years following his marriage he published several novels, an edition of *Don Quixote*, and his translations of *Ancient Spanish Ballads*. This last work has never been superseded, and is often reprinted. In 1826 he became editor of the *Quarterly Review*, and retained the position until the year before his death, in 1854. His *Life of Robert Burns* appeared in 1828, and a *Life of Napoleon Bonaparte* in the next year. His greatest work, the *Life of Scott*, appeared in 1836–38, and by general consent has taken in English biographical literature a place second only to that of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*.

Carlyle was introduced to Lockhart when on a visit to London, in 1832. In his Note Book at that time he calls Lockhart "a precise, brief, active person of considerable faculty," and confesses that he "rather liked the man."¹ A month later, in a letter to his brother, he calls him "not without force, but barren and unfruitful."² Seven years after this, when Carlyle was settled in London, he formed the project of writing an article on the working-classes for the *Quarterly*; with this in mind he called upon Lockhart, and, he says, "found him a person of sense, good breeding, even kindness."³ Ever after this, though the two men were never intimate friends, they had warm affection and esteem for each other. Lockhart feared to accept Carlyle's article because of its radical opinions, and it was published separately, under the title of *Chartism*. One more link between

¹ Froude: *Thomas Carlyle, a History of the First Forty Years of his Life*, ii. 188.

² *Ibid.*, ii. 212.

³ Quoted in Froude: *Thomas Carlyle, a History of his Life in London*, i. 140, from a letter of Carlyle's to his brother.

the men is Carlyle's review — one of his least satisfactory essays — of the *Life of Scott*, published in 1838, in the *London and Westminster Review*. And Carlyle's own judgment of Lockhart widens our knowledge of the character of both men.

“A hard, proud, but thoroughly honest, singularly intelligent, and also affectionate man, whom in the distance I esteemed more than perhaps he ever knew. Seldom did I speak to him ; but hardly ever without learning and gaining something.”¹

Thomas Carlyle was born December 4, 1795, at Annandale, in Dumfriesshire, in southeast Scotland. His life offers many resemblances, though perhaps more contrasts, to that of Burns. Like Burns, he came from the strong, rough stock of the Scotch peasantry. Of his father, James Carlyle, a man like Burns's father in his strength of character and deeply religious temperament, but unlike him in his complete ignorance of all books except the Bible, Carlyle has himself left us a grand portrait in the *Reminiscences*. When ten years old, Carlyle was sent to the Annan grammar school. Of his life there we may judge from the veiled account in *Sartor Resartus* :—

“My Teachers were hide-bound Pedants, without knowledge of man's nature, or of boy's; or of aught save their lexicons and quarterly account-books. Innumerable dead Vocables (no dead Language, for they themselves knew no Language) they crammed into us, and called it fostering the growth of mind. . . . The Professors knew syntax enough; and of the human soul thus much: that it had a faculty called Memory, and could be acted-on through the muscular integument by the appliance of birch-rods.”²

James Carlyle recognized his son's ability, and resolved

¹ See note by Carlyle in *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. Froude, i. 107.

² *Sartor Resartus*, II. iii.

that he should be an educated man. Yet Carlyle can hardly be said to have been "sent" to the University, for he *walked* the distance of seventy miles over rough country to Edinburgh. There he worked industriously in the library, and laid the foundations for his wonderful knowledge of books. He tells us later:—

"What I have found the University did for me, was that it taught me to read in various languages and various sciences, so that I could go into the books that treated of these things, and try anything I wanted to make myself master of gradually, as I found it suit me."¹

Carlyle had been intended for the ministry, but money was lacking, and he took up school teaching as a temporary occupation. In 1818, having saved ninety pounds, he returned to Edinburgh for study. Meanwhile, the ministry had become closed to him, for reading and thought had undermined his belief in the creed of the Scotch Kirk. But Carlyle's reaction from his ancestral beliefs was occasioned by different circumstances from that of Burns. Carlyle, by deep study and meditation, was stirred from the dogmas of the Scotch Kirk, but adhered strictly to its stern, severe code of morals. Burns, who had a lighter, more facile nature, became disgusted with the hypocrisy of those high in church authority, and was attracted by the more winning characters of the leaders of the progressive party. His passions had already weakened his morals; and though he still professed the highest respect for religion in the abstract, he was led on from distrust of orthodox Calvinism to what often seems general skepticism and indifference on religious matters.

After an experiment in legal study, Carlyle finally settled on his trade as a "writer of books." From 1818 to 1822 he lived in Edinburgh, and did hack literary work, largely articles for the *Edinburgh Encyclopædia*. In 1822 he

¹ Address delivered to the Students of Edinburgh University — April 2, 1866.

became tutor in a private family, with whom he travelled, not returning to Edinburgh until 1825. During these years of indecision as to what should be his life pursuit he had been occupied with German literature, and had published his translation of *Wilhelm Meister* and his *Life of Schiller*. For these works he received grateful acknowledgment from Goethe, and by them established a reputation as a writer. In 1827 he met Jeffrey, and made a contract with him to write for the *Edinburgh Review*.

Meanwhile, in 1826, Carlyle had married Jane Baillie Welsh. Two years later, through the failure of some literary plans, he decided to remove, for the sake of economy, to his wife's farm of Craigenputtock, in southwest Dumfrieshire, in the wild moorland country, fifteen miles from any town. There he resolved, in spite of poverty, to publish no work that did not satisfy his ideal. Carlyle's impressions of his hermit life vary with his changing moods,—now he praises his home as a rural paradise; again he writes in his diary, "Finished a paper on Burns September 16, 1828, at this Devil's Den, Craigenputtock."¹

This last phrase shows us that the *Essay on Burns* was one of the first products of Carlyle's self-imposed exile. Of all his essays, this is on the topic nearest to the author's life. Carlyle was drawn to his subject by every bond of race, language, and association. His birthplace, Annandale, is only ten miles from Dumfries, Burns's last home. He had talked with many who had known Burns in life, among them Gilbert Burns, the poet's brother. Though an estimate of the merits of the essay will be more appropriate later, some circumstances connected with its publication must here be noted, for the light which they throw on Carlyle's character. The account of them is quoted, with some small changes, from Froude.

Jeffrey "found the article long and diffuse, though he

¹ Froude: *Thomas Carlyle, a History of the First Forty Years of his Life*. ii. 26.

did not deny that ‘it contained much beauty and felicity of diction.’ He insisted that it must be cut down,” and received permission from Carlyle to make some alterations.¹ “When the proof-sheets came, Carlyle found ‘the first part cut all into shreds,— the body of a quadruped with the head of a bird, a man shortened by cutting out the thighs and fixing the knee-caps on the hips.’² He refused to let it appear ‘in such a horrid shape.’ He replaced the most important passages, and returned the sheets with an intimation that the paper might be cancelled, but should not be mutilated. Few editors would have been so forbearing as Jeffrey when so audaciously defied. He complained, but he acquiesced. He admitted that the article would do the Review credit, though it would be called tedious and sprawling by people of weight whose mouths he could have stopped. He had wished to be of use to Carlyle by keeping out of sight in the Review his mannerism and affectation ; but if Carlyle persisted he might have his way.

“Carlyle was touched ; such kindness was more than he had looked for. The proud self-assertion was followed by humility and almost penitence, and the gentle tone in which he wrote conquered Jeffrey in turn. Jeffrey said that he admired and approved of Carlyle’s letter to him in all respects. ‘The candour and sweet blood’ which was shown in it deserved the highest praise. ‘Your virtues are your own,’ said Jeffrey, ‘and you shall have anything you like.’ ”³

During Carlyle’s residence at Craigenputtock, which lasted, with slight interruption, for six years, were produced most of the miscellaneous essays, and his first great original work, *Sartor Resartus*. This is the formative period of his literary life, from which he came forth, to quote Mr.

¹ *Letters of Thomas Carlyle*, 1826–1836, p. 123.

² Quoted from a letter from Carlyle to his brother, October 10, 1828. There is here a reminiscence of the opening lines of Horace’s *Ars Poetica*.

³ Froude : *Thomas Carlyle, a History of the First Forty Years of his Life*, ii. 31–35.

Stephen, "a master of his craft." In 1834 he moved to London, where he resided until his death, in 1881. To this later period belong his greatest works, on which his fame depends : *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, *The French Revolution*, *Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, and *The History of Frederick the Great*. But the earlier works have the same tonic quality as the later, and are free from many of their defects. As a teacher, especially if we take an American point of view, Carlyle grows less trustworthy with advancing years. His cynicism becomes more bitter, his hero-worship leads him to sympathize with autocracy, while his contempt for the stupidity of the masses leads him to distrust all popular government. In Lowell's words, quoting Carlyle's contemptuous phrase, "he saw 'only the burning of a dirty chimney' in the war which a great people was waging under his very eyes for the idea of nationality and orderly magistrature."

In the *Essay on Burns*, then, we have a work of Carlyle's early prime. We might infer this from the style alone, which shows a transition from his early clearness and simplicity to the "piebald, entangled, hyper-metaphorical style of writing" characteristic of his later works, and always associated with his name.

In the *Essay on Burns* it is not the author's intention to give a connected sketch of Burns's life,¹ or to pass a cool, critical judgment on his poetry as a whole. Carlyle has himself, on page 6 of this essay, given us his idea of the true purpose of biography. The following words from his second essay on Richter make his meaning still clearer : —

"If the acted life of a *pius Yates* is so high a matter, the written life, which, if properly written, would be a translation and interpretation thereof, must also have great value. It has been said that no Poet is equal to his Poem, which saying is partially true; but in a deeper sense, it

¹ For this reason, a brief sketch of the poet's life is given the reader after this Introduction. See pp. xiv.-xvii.

may also be asserted, and with still greater truth, that no Poem is equal to its Poet. Now, it is Biography which first gives us both Poet and Poem; by the significance of the one, elucidating and completing that of the other. That ideal outline of himself, which a man unconsciously shadows forth in his writings, and which, rightly deciphered, will be truer than any other representation of him, it is the task of the Biographer to fill up into an actual coherent figure, and bring home to our experience, or at least clear, undoubting admiration, thereby to instruct and edify us in many ways. Conducted on such principles, the Biography of great men, especially of great poets, that is, of men in the highest degree noble minded and wise, might become one of the most dignified and valuable species of composition. As matters stand, indeed, there are few Biographies that accomplish anything of this kind; the most are mere Indexes of a Biography, which each reader is to write out for himself, as he peruses them; not the living body, but the dry bones of a body, which should have been alive. To expect any such Promethean virtue in a common Life-writer were unreasonable enough. How shall that unhappy Biographic brotherhood, instead of writing like Index-makers and Government-clerks, suddenly become enkindled with some sparks of intellect, or even of genial fire; and not only collecting dates and facts, but making use of them, look beyond the surface and economical form of a man's life, into its substance and spirit?"

In pursuit of this great aim, Carlyle has to adapt his method to his subject. In writing of Richter, a man unknown to the British public of his time, he has to give us himself the "dry bones" of fact, before he can give the "living body." But in the case of Burns, as he can assume that his readers are familiar with Burns's chief poems, and know the main events of his life, he brushes aside all detail, and treats at once the inner meaning and value of the poet's life and work. To appreciate Carlyle's essay, we must

fulfil his expectation of us, and know Burns at first hand before we start to read about him.

We must now ask how far Carlyle corresponds to his own ideal biographer. No one can read this essay without admitting that we have in it a powerful and sympathetic conception of Burns. To decide whether this conception is just and impartial we must take into account the writer's general temperament and leading ideas.

Carlyle is a hero-worshipper in all his work, as a quotation from *Sartor Resartus* will best explain : —

“ Meanwhile, observe with joy, so cunningly has Nature ordered it, that whatsoever man ought to obey, he cannot but obey. Before no faintest revelation of the Godlike did he ever stand irreverent ; least of all, when the Godlike showed itself revealed in his fellow-man. Thus there is a true religious Loyalty forever rooted in his heart ; nay in all ages, even in ours, it manifests itself as a more or less orthodox *Hero-worship*. In which fact, that Hero-worship exists, has existed, and will forever exist, universally among Mankind, mayest thou discern the corner-stone of living-rock, whereon all Polities for the remotest time may stand secure.

“ Hast thou forgotten Paris and Voltaire ? How the aged, withered man, though but a skeptic, mocker, and mil-linery Court-poet, yet because even he seemed the Wisest, Best, could drag mankind at his chariot-wheels, so that princes coveted a smile from him, and the loveliest of Francee would have laid their hair beneath his feet. All Paris was one vast Temple of Hero-worship ; though their Divinity, moreover, was of feature too apish.”¹

As Carlyle is fallible, like other men, the practical effect of his doctrine is that he exalts those whom he likes, and throws contempt on those whom he dislikes. Since he is attracted by Burns's noble qualities, above all by his sincerity, he forms a grand ideal conception of him. Indeed,

¹ *Sartor Resartus*. III. vii.

in his *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, written twelve years later, he boldly pronounces Burns "the most gifted British soul we had in all that century of his." The lecture upon "the hero as man of letters" should be studied carefully by all who wish to understand Carlyle's attitude towards the great writers of the world, and towards Burns as one of them. It would, however, be of small use to read, as a sort of postscript to this essay, the half-dozen pages which Carlyle there devotes especially to Burns. He there repeats many of the thoughts of this essay,—when a writer has once clearly and fully spoken his mind of a man he cannot well treat of him again without repetition. The value of the lecture on "the hero as man of letters" is, that it gives us in brief form general ideas, of which the *Essay on Burns* is a particular application.

In consequence of his conception of Burns as a hero, Carlyle casts aside, as of slight importance in the general estimate, evidence that opposes his own view, or even entirely refuses to believe it. Thus he dwells on Burns's finest poems, and pays little heed to his affected English verse and stilted prose. Yet they, too, are of Burns's writing, and demand full consideration, if we are to understand the whole man. Again, he will not credit an anecdote for which there is fairly good evidence, because it shows in Burns a foolish vanity that seems to him impossible. So, at the best, our essay gives only a partial view of Burns. Those who wish to learn more of the seamy side of the poet's character will do well to read an essay by as loyal a son of Scotland, and as kindly and sympathetic a writer, as Carlyle himself,—Robert Louis Stevenson.¹

Much more might be said in dispraise of Carlyle's work, and yet its essential greatness would remain unaffected. After the lapse of nearly seventy years, this essay is still by far our best portrait of Burns. All succeeding critics have had to take Carlyle into account. They may differ

¹ In *Familiar Studies of Men and Books*.

widely from his conclusions, but they cannot fail to recognize his transcendent merits. Though the judgments of Carlyle on Burns have, in the main, stood well the test of time, yet in this, as in all his writings, his excellence lies less in his own opinions than in his power to make others think for themselves. Carlyle has little of the finish, proportion, discrimination, that we find in Matthew Arnold or Sainte-Beuve. But for the ordinary reader he is far more useful than many a writer who comes nearer the absolute truth. He touches our hearts and arouses our sympathies. Most readers of a critic ask, not: "After reading this essay can I distinguish more accurately between the good and bad art in my author, and judge better of their comparative importance?" but: "Does this critic make me more able to understand the best that is in my poet, so that I share more deeply in his highest life and thought?" Let us then, with due reverence, approach the thoughts of one of the greatest thinkers of Scotland upon the greatest of her poets.

A SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF ROBERT BURNS.

ROBERT BURNS was born on January 25, 1759, in a clay-built cottage, at Alloway in Ayrshire, in southwest Scotland. Except for the personal character of his father, his lot was that of any poor peasant lad. But the elder Burns had a natural love of learning, attended carefully to his sons' education himself, and, further, gave them as good schooling as it lay in his power to do. The teacher of Robert Burns and his younger brother Gilbert was John Murdoch, a young man of uncommon merit, who interested himself in the boys, and lent them various books. Robert grew thoroughly familiar with his small library, learned French fairly well, and began Latin. He was particularly fascinated by a book of English songs, and carried it with him into the fields. He early became noted as the best converser and the best letter writer in the parish. When Burns was still a child his father had removed to another farm, at Mount Oliphant; later, when Burns was eighteen, to Lochlea, in the parish of Tarbolton. The family affairs were never long prosperous; and the distress endured at Mount Oliphant from a tyrannical *factor*, or landlord's agent, is commemorated in *The Twa Dogs*, just as the happy home life is reproduced in *The Cotter's Saturday Night*. Through all his youth Burns was a laborer for his father; and his first song, *Handsome Nell*, written when he was only fifteen, is in honor of a chancery partner in the harvest field.

In 1782, when he was twenty-three years old, Burns engaged in business at the town of Irvine, but was reduced to poverty by the burning of his shop, and returned to Lochlea. The short residence at the thriving seaport affected for the

worse his habits of life and thought. Until then Burns had led an ordinarily correct life; but at Irvine he learned to drink, and to think lightly of infidelity to women. *The Poet's Welcome to his Illegitimate Child* bears sad witness to this alteration in his character.

In 1784, soon after Burns's return home, his father died, leaving his affairs in utter ruin. Three months before his death Robert and Gilbert had taken the farm of Mossgiel, in the neighboring parish of Mauchline, and thither the whole family now removed. The years 1785 and 1786 are Burns's great period of poetical production; within them fall most of the pieces, exclusive of *Tam O'Shanter* and of his songs, by which he is now best known. At this time the theological controversy between the two parties in the Scotch Kirk occupied the attention of every one. Burns was attracted by the personal character of the leaders of the *New Light*, or progressive, party; and aided them in their warfare upon the *Old Light* divines by many stinging satires, notably *The Holy Fair*, *The Twa Herds*, and *Holy Willie's Prayer*. Readers to-day have come to have a new interest in the *Old Lights*, or *Auld Lichts*, as the Scotch term is, through J. M. Barrie's tales and sketches.

In 1785 Burns met and fell in love with Jean Armour, and the next year twin children were born to them. Burns, in order to save the girl from disgrace, had given her a written acknowledgment of marriage; but her father, who had a poor opinion of the poet's general character, had forced her to destroy this. Burns, finding himself without money or position in society, resolved to emigrate to Jamaica, and published a thin volume of his poems in order to raise money for the passage. The success of the book was great and immediate, and altered the whole course of Burns's life. Dugald Stewart, the philosopher, entertained him at his house; Henry MacKenzie, the novelist, gave him a flattering review; and, finally, an enthusiastic letter from Dr. Blacklock, one of the most celebrated Edinburgh critics,

made him decide to give up his plan of flight from his native country, and to try his fortune at the Scotch capital. The volume of poems was also the means of his acquaintance with the excellent Mrs. Dunlop, with whom he corresponded until the end of his life.

In November, 1786, Burns went to Edinburgh, and was the "lion" of the following winter. A new edition of his poems received three thousand subscribers, and brought him in about £500. Of this he lent £180 to his brother Gilbert, to help in the management of Mossgiel,—the loan was finally repaid some thirty years later to the poet's family. During the following year he made two trips through Scotland, partly to collect songs, and began to contribute to Johnson's *Scot's Musical Museum* and Thomson's *Collection of Scottish Airs*. The poet applied for, and obtained, a commission in the Excise, the only worldly advantage, except the profits of his poems, that he derived from his triumphal Edinburgh season. Reserving his commission as a last resort, Burns rented a farm at Ellisland, near Dumfries, where he settled in the summer of 1788. He had renewed his intimacy with Jean Armour, and, when she became once more exposed to the anger of her father, made her all the reparation in his power, by marriage. The farm was not a success, and Burns tried to carry on the Excise business along with it. When this division of labor also proved unsatisfactory, he abandoned Ellisland, and, in November, 1792, moved to Dumfries.

At Dumfries Burns was advanced to an Excise division, with a salary of seventy pounds, and retained the position until his death. His hopes of further promotion were cut off by his ill-timed expressions of sympathy with the American Revolution, and with the republican party in France. He attended well to the duties of his office, but occasional drunkenness and other misconduct brought on him the ill favor of the "Dumfries aristocracy." The boon companions with whom he mingled, and the curious tourists attracted by

his fame, were in no small measure the cause of his poor success. On January 2, 1793, he writes to Mrs. Dunlop:—

“Occasionally hard drinking is the devil to me. Against this I have again and again bent my resolution, and have greatly succeeded. Taverns I have totally abandoned: it is the private parties in the family way, among the hard-drinking gentlemen of this country, that do me the mischief.”

The poet’s excesses did not keep him from being an affectionate father, and attending carefully to his children’s education. He died on July 21, 1796.

Burns’s life since leaving Edinburgh had, on the whole, been one of decline. With the exception of his songs, which he never ceased to contribute to Thomson’s *Collection of Scottish Airs*, and of *Tam O’Shanter*, written at Ellisland, he had produced no important poem since that time. But this sketch of Burns’s life must not attempt an estimate of his character as poet or man. Its only object is to furnish for ready reference a few of the facts necessary for understanding Carlyle’s work.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE.

EVERY author should be studied, as far as possible, from his own writings. Carlyle's voluminous correspondence furnishes rich materials for the history of his life and thought. The best editions of his letters are those edited by Professor Charles Eliot Norton : *Early Letters of Thomas Carlyle* (1814-1826), *Letters of Thomas Carlyle* (1826-1836), *Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson*. These may be supplemented by Froude's edition of the *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*. Next to these first-hand documents, Froude's *Thomas Carlyle*, in spite of its inaccuracy and its prejudiced point of view, will remain the great storehouse of information for students of the subject. There are good short lives of Carlyle by John Nichol (*English Men of Letters Series*) and Richard Garnett (*Great Writers Series*). The former deals more fully in criticism on his literary work. There are excellent critical appreciations of Carlyle by James Russell Lowell, Augustine Birrell (in *Obiter Dicta*), and Matthew Arnold (in *Essay on Emerson*).

The best way to study Burns is to learn the outline of the external events of his life from any short sketch, and then to read his poems and letters in chronological order. Besides the life by Lockhart, there are good accounts of him by Principal Shairp (*English Men of Letters Series*) and John Stuart Blackie (*Great Writers Series*). Carlyle mentions by name Currie and Walker among the biographers of Burns previous to Lockhart. Dr. James Currie (1756-1805), a famous Scotch physician, published in 1800 an edition of Burns's works, with an account of his life, in aid of the poet's family. The *Life of Burns*, written by Josiah Walker, later Professor of Humanity in Glasgow University, to accompany an edition of Burns's works published in 1811, has no permanent value.

Unlike the other two men, Lockhart does not appeal to us as much by his personal character as by his writings. *The Life and Letters of John Gibson Lockhart*, by Andrew Lang, is the best book with regard to him.

ESSAY ON BURNS.¹

IN the modern arrangements of society, it is no uncommon thing that a man of genius must, like Butler,² “ask for bread and receive a stone;” for, in spite of our grand maxim of supply and demand, it is by no means the highest excellence that men are most forward to recognize. The inventor of a spinning-jenny is pretty sure of his reward in his own day; but the writer of a true poem, like the apostle of a true religion, is nearly as sure of the contrary. We do not know whether it is not an aggravation of the injustice, that there is generally a posthumous retribution. Robert Burns, in the course of Nature, might yet have been living; but his short life was spent in toil and penury; and he died, in the prime of his manhood, miserable and neglected: and yet already a brave mausoleum shines over his dust,³ and more

¹ The text followed is that of Carlyle’s latest authorized form. Important variations from the form as printed in the *Edinburgh Review* are pointed out.

² Samuel Butler (1612–1680). *Hudibras* was one of Carlyle’s favorite books.

³ “In 1813 a public meeting was held in Dumfries; a subscription was opened, and, contributions flowing in rapidly from all quarters, a costly mausoleum was at length erected on the most elevated site which the churchyard presented. Thither the remains of the poet were solemnly transferred on the 5th of June, 1815.” — Lockhart, chap. ix.

Carlyle used *brave* ironically in the sense of *beautiful, splendid*.

than one splendid monument has been reared in other places to his fame; the street where he languished in poverty is called by his name;¹ the highest personages in our literature have been proud to appear as his commentators and admirers; and here is the *sixth* narrative of his life that has been given to the world!²

Mr. Lockhart thinks it necessary to apologize for this new attempt on such a subject: but his readers, we believe, will readily acquit him; or, at worst, will censure only the performance of his task, not the choice of it. The character of Burns, indeed, is a theme that cannot easily become either trite or exhausted; and will probably gain rather than lose in its dimensions by the distance to which it is removed by Time. No man, it has been said, is a hero to his valet; and this is probably true; but the fault is at least as likely to be the valet's as the hero's. For it is certain, that to the vulgar eye few things are wonderful that are not distant. It is difficult for men to believe that the man, the mere man whom they see, nay perhaps painfully feel toiling at their side through the poor jostlings of existence, can be made of finer clay than themselves. Suppose that some dining acquaintance of Sir Thomas Lucy's, and neighbor of John a Combe's,³ had snatched an hour or two from the preservation of his game, and written us a Life

Lockhart says mildly: "The structure is perhaps more gaudy than might have been wished."

¹ The name of the *Mill Vennel* in Dumfries, where Burns lived from May, 1793, until his death, was changed to *Burns Street*.

² The five *Lives* of Burns referred to by Carlyle are probably those mentioned by Lockhart, by Walker, Currie, Heron, Irving, and Peterkin. In reality the number was still larger.

³ To understand these references, read any good sketch of Shakespeare's life.

of Shakespeare! What dissertations should we not have had, — not on “Hamlet” and “The Tempest,” but on the wool-trade, and deer-stealing, and the libel and vagrant laws; and how the Poacher became a Player; and how Sir Thomas and Mr. John had Christian bowels, and did not push him to extremities! In like manner, we believe, with respect to Burns, that till the companions of his pilgrimage, the Honorable Excise Commissioners, and the Gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt,¹ and the Dumfries Aristocracy, and all the Squires and Earls, equally with the Ayr Writers,² and the New and Old Light Clergy, whom he had to do with, shall have become invisible in the darkness of the Past, or visible only by light borrowed from *his* juxtaposition, it will be difficult to measure him by any true standard, or to estimate what he really was and did, in the eighteenth century, for his country and the world. It will be difficult, we say; but still a fair problem for literary historians; and repeated attempts will give us repeated approximations.

His former Biographers have done something, no doubt, but by no means a great deal, to assist us. Dr. Currie and Mr. Walker, the principal of these writers, have both, we think, mistaken one essentially important thing: Their own and the world’s true relation to their author, and the style in which it be-

¹ “*The Caledonian Hunt*, an association of the principal of the nobility and gentry of Scotland, extended their patronage to our bard. He repaid the notice by a dedication of the enlarged and improved [*the first Edinburgh*] edition of his poems.” — Currie’s *Life of Burns*.

² In Scotland *writer* is used loosely of law agents, solicitors, attorneys, and the like, and sometimes even of their principal clerks. Burns alludes to the *Ayr writers* in *The Brigs of Ayr*.

came such men to think and to speak of such a man. Dr. Currie loved the poet truly; more perhaps than he avowed to his readers, or even to himself; yet he everywhere introduces him with a certain patronizing, apologetic air; as if the polite public might think it strange and half unwarrantable that he, a man of science, a scholar and gentleman, should do such honor to a rustic. In all this, however, we readily admit that his fault was not want of love, but weakness of faith; and regret that the first and kindest of all our poet's biographers should not have seen farther, or believed more boldly what he saw. Mr. Walker offends more deeply in the same kind: and both err alike in presenting us with a detached catalogue of his several supposed attributes, virtues and vices, instead of a delineation of the resulting character as a living unity. This, however, is not painting a portrait; but gauging the length and breadth of the several features, and jotting down their dimensions in arithmetical ciphers. Nay, it is not so much as that: for we are yet to learn by what arts or instruments the mind *could* be so measured and gauged.

Mr. Lockhart, we are happy to say, has avoided both these errors. He uniformly treats Burns as the high and remarkable man the public voice has now pronounced him to be: and in delineating him, he has avoided the method of separate generalities, and rather sought for characteristic incidents, habits, actions, sayings; in a word, for aspects which exhibit the whole man, as he looked and lived among his fellows. The book accordingly, with all its deficiencies, gives more insight, we think, into the true character of Burns than any prior biography: though, being

written on the very popular and condensed scheme of an article for "Constable's Miscellany,"¹ it has less depth than we could have wished and expected from a writer of such power; and contains rather more, and more multifarious quotations than belong of right to an original production. Indeed, Mr. Lockhart's own writing is generally so good, so clear, direct and nervous, that we seldom wish to see it making place for another man's. However, the spirit of the work is throughout candid, tolerant and anxiously conciliating; compliments and praises are liberally distributed, on all hands, to great and small; and, as Mr. Morris Birkbeck² observes of the society in the backwoods of America, "the courtesies of polite life are never lost sight of for a moment." But there are better things than these in the volume; and we can safely testify, not only that it is easily and pleasantly read a first time, but may even be without difficulty read again.³

¹ *The Edinburgh Review* owed much of its success to Archibald Constable, its first printer. Constable rose to be one of the chief publishers of his time, and is especially famous for his connection with Scott, but became bankrupt in 1826. *Constable's Miscellany of Original and Selected Publications in Literature, Science, and the Arts* has a pathetic interest as being the poor fulfilment of a scheme that he had formed, before his failure, of a series of cheap volumes that should sell, he told Scott, "not by thousands or tens of thousands, but by hundreds of thousands — aye, by millions."

² Author of *Notes on a Journey in America, from the Coast of Virginia to the Territory of Illinois.* (London, 1818.)

³ Carlyle's judgment on Lockhart's work seems to have improved with reflection. In a letter to his brother, June 10, 1828, he writes: "Lockhart had written a kind of *Life of Burns*, and men in general were making another uproar about Burns; it is this Book (a trivial enough one) which I am to pretend reviewing."

Nevertheless, we are far from thinking that the problem of Burns's Biography has yet been adequately solved. We do not allude so much to deficiency of facts or documents, — though of these we are still every day receiving some fresh accession, — as to the limited and imperfect application of them to the great end of Biography. Our notions upon this subject may perhaps appear extravagant; but if an individual is really of consequence enough to have his life and character recorded for public remembrance, we have always been of opinion that the public ought to be made acquainted with all the inward springs and relations of his character. How did the world and man's life, from his particular position, represent themselves to his mind? How did co-existing circumstances modify him from without; how did he modify these from within? With what endeavors and what efficacy rule over them; with what resistance and what suffering sink under them? In one word, what and how produced was the effect of society on him; what and how produced was his effect on society? He who should answer these questions, in regard to any individual, would, as we believe, furnish a model of perfection in Biography. Few individuals, indeed, can deserve such a study; and many *lives* will be written, and, for the gratification of innocent curiosity, ought to be written, and read and forgotten, which are not in this sense *biographies*. But Burns, if we mistake not, is one of these few individuals; and such a study, at least with such a result, he has not yet obtained. Our own contributions to it, we are aware, can be but scanty and feeble; but we offer them with good-will, and trust

they may meet with acceptance from those they are intended for.¹

Burns first came upon the world as a prodigy; and was, in that character, entertained by it, in the usual fashion, with loud, vague, tumultuous wonder, speedily subsiding into censure and neglect; till his early and most mournful death again awakened an enthusiasm for him, which, especially as there was now nothing to be done, and much to be spoken, has prolonged itself even to our own time. It is true, the “nine days” have long since elapsed; and the very continuance of this clamor proves that Burns was no vulgar wonder. Accordingly, even in sober judgments, where, as years passed by, he has come to rest more and more exclusively on his own intrinsic merits, and may now be well-nigh shorn of that casual radiance, he appears not only as a true British poet, but as one of the most considerable British men of the eighteenth century. Let it not be objected that he did little. He did much, if we consider where and how. If the work performed was small, we must remember that he had his very materials to discover; for the metal he worked in lay hid under the desert moor, where no eye but his had guessed its existence; and we may almost say, that with his own hand he had to construct the tools for fashioning it. For he found himself in deepest obscurity, without help, without instruction, without model; or with models only of the meanest sort. An educated man stands, as it were, in the midst of a boundless arsenal and

¹ The apologetic expressions in the early part of this essay may, as Mr. H. W. Boynton well suggests in his excellent edition, be relied of Jeffrey's editing.

magazine, filled with all the weapons and engines which man's skill has been able to devise from the earliest time; and he works, accordingly, with a strength borrowed from all past ages. How different is *his* state who stands on the outside of that storehouse, and feels that its gates must be stormed, or remain forever shut against him! His means are the commonest and rudest; the mere work done is no measure of his strength. A dwarf behind his steam-engine may remove mountains; but no dwarf will hew them down with a pickaxe; and he must be a Titan that hurls them abroad with his arms.

It is in this last shape that Burns presents himself. Born in an age the most prosaic Britain had yet seen, and in a condition the most disadvantageous, where his mind, if it accomplished aught, must accomplish it under the pressure of continual bodily toil, nay of penury and desponding apprehension of the worst evils, and with no furtherance but such knowledge as dwells in a poor man's hut, and the rhymes of a Ferguson or Ramsay¹ for his standard of beauty, he sinks not under all these impediments: through the fogs and darkness of that obscure region, his lynx eye discerns the true relations of the world and human life; he grows into intellectual strength, and trains himself into intellectual expertness. Impelled by the expansive movement of his own irrepressible soul, he

¹ Carlyle is always extreme in his judgments, and here is unjustly contemptuous of men whom, as the quotation from Scott below (p. 60) will show, Burns always regarded as his models, and whom he often directly and openly imitated. Ramsay has been admired by men as different as Pope and Leigh Hunt; and Stevenson, whose estimate of these men in his essay on *Some Aspects of Robert Burns* it would be well to read, places the "poor lad Fergusson" even higher than Ramsay.

struggles forward into the general view; and with haughty modesty lays down before us, as the fruit of his labor, a gift which Time has now pronounced imperishable. Add to all this, that his darksome drudging childhood and youth was by far the kindest era of his whole life; and that he died in his thirty-seventh year: and then ask, If it be strange that his poems are imperfect, and of small extent, or that his genius attained no mastery in its art? Alas, his Sun shone as through a tropical tornado; and the pale Shadow of Death eclipsed it at noon! Shrouded in such baleful vapors, the genius of Burns was never seen in clear azure splendor, enlightening the world: but some beams from it did, by fits, pierce through; and it tinted those clouds with rainbow and orient colors, into a glory and stern grandeur, which men silently gazed on with wonder and tears!

We are anxious not to exaggerate; for it is exposition rather than admiration that our readers require of us here; and yet to avoid some tendency to that side is no easy matter. We love Burns, and we pity him; and love and pity are prone to magnify. Criticism, it is sometimes thought, should be a cold business; we are not so sure of this;¹ but, at all events, our concern with Burns is not exclusively that of critics. True and genial as his poetry must appear, it is not chiefly as a poet, but as a man, that he interests and affects us. He was often advised to write a tragedy;² time and means were not lent him for

¹ Here Carlyle touches on the source of his own power,—the maxim that the pleasure of criticism deprives us of that of vivid appreciation does not apply to him.

² The *Tragic Fragment* printed in Burns's works was written when he was only nineteen. And in 1790 Burns told friends that he was preparing to write a play on a subject drawn from Scottish history.

this; but through life he enacted a tragedy, and one of the deepest. We question whether the world has since witnessed so utterly sad a scene; whether Napoleon himself, left to brawl with Sir Hudson Lowe, and perish on his rock, "amid the melancholy main," presented to the reflecting mind such a "spectacle of pity and fear" as did this intrinsically nobler, gentler and perhaps greater soul, wasting itself away in a hopeless struggle with base entanglements, which coiled closer and closer round him till only death opened him an outlet. Conquerors are a class of men with whom, for most part, the world could well dispense; nor can the hard intellect, the unsympathizing loftiness and high but selfish enthusiasm of such persons inspire us in general with any affection; at best it may excite amazement; and their fall, like that of a pyramid, will be beheld with a certain sadness and awe. But a true Poet, a man in whose heart resides some effluence of Wisdom, some tone of the "Eternal Melodies," is the most precious gift that can be bestowed on a generation: we see in him a freer, purer development of whatever is noblest in ourselves; his life is a rich lesson to us; and we mourn his death as that of a benefactor who loved and taught us.¹

Such a gift had Nature, in her bounty, bestowed on us in Robert Burns; but with queenlike indifference she cast it from her hand, like a thing of no

¹ Though Carlyle never changed his opinion of a true poet, his later writings show a very different estimate of the value of conquerors to the world. After his removal to London, he writes but little on literature, and is usually full of scorn for the profession of letters. He tends to idealize mere strength of will and brute force of character, if accompanied by sincerity. He praises the power of silent action; and his favorite heroes are men of deeds, like Cromwell and Frederick.

moment; and it was defaced and torn asunder, as an idle bauble, before we recognized it. To the ill-starred Burns was given the power of making man's life more venerable, but that of wisely guiding his own life was not given. Destiny,—for so in our ignorance we must speak,—his faults, the faults of others, proved too hard for him; and that spirit, which might have soared could it but have walked, soon sank to the dust, its glorious faculties trodden under foot in the blossom; and died, we may almost say, without ever having lived. And so kind and warm a soul; so full of inborn riches, of love to all living and lifeless things! How his heart flows out in sympathy over universal Nature; and in her bleakest provinces discerns a beauty and a meaning! The “Daisy” falls not unheeded under his ploughshare; nor the ruined nest of that “wee, cowering, timorous beastie,” cast forth, after all its provident pains, to “thole the sleety dribble and cranreuch cauld.”¹ The “hoar visage” of Winter delights him; he dwells with a sad and oft-returning fondness in these scenes of solemn desolation; but the voice of the tempest becomes an anthem to his ears; he loves to walk in the sounding woods, for “it raises his thoughts to *Him that walketh on the wings of the wind.*”² A true Poet-soul, for it needs but to be struck, and the sound it yields will be music! But observe him chiefly as he mingles with his brother men. What warm, all-comprehending fellow-feeling; what trust-

¹ See *To a Mountain Daisy* and *To a Mouse*. *Cranreuch* = hoar frost.

² This passage is suggested by a prose entry in Burns's *Common-Place Book* (April, 1784), which serves as introduction to the poem *Winter*. The words in italics are from Psalm 104.

ful, boundless love; what generous exaggeration of the object loved! His rustic friend, his nut-brown maiden, are no longer mean and homely, but a hero and a queen, whom he prizes as the paragons of Earth. The rough scenes of Scottish life, not seen by him in any Arcadian illusion, but in the rude contradiction, in the smoke and soil of a too harsh reality, are still lovely to him: Poverty is indeed his companion, but Love also, and Courage; the simple feelings, the worth, the nobleness, that dwell under the straw roof, are dear and venerable to his heart: and thus over the lowest provinces of man's existence he pours the glory of his own soul; and they rise, in shadow and sunshine, softened and brightened into a beauty which other eyes discern not in the highest. He has a just self-consciousness, which too often degenerates into pride; yet it is a noble pride, for defence, not for offence; no cold suspicious feeling, but a frank and social one. The Peasant Poet bears himself, we might say, like a King in exile: he is east among the low, and feels himself equal to the highest; yet he claims no rank, that none may be disputed to him. The forward he can repel, the supercilious he can subdue; pretensions of wealth or ancestry are of no avail with him; there is a fire in that dark eye, under which the "insolence of condescension" cannot thrive. In his abasement, in his extreme need, he forgets not for a moment the majesty of Poetry and Manhood. And yet, far as he feels himself above common men, he wanders not apart from them, but mixes warmly in their interests; nay throws himself into their arms, and, as it were, entreats them to love him. It is moving to see how, in his darkest despondency, this proud being still seeks

relief from friendship: unbosoms himself, often to the unworthy; and, amid tears, strains to his glowing heart a heart that knows only the name of friendship. And yet he was “quick to learn;” a man of keen vision, before whom common disguises afforded no concealment. His understanding saw through the hollowness even of accomplished deceivers; but there was a generous credulity in his heart. And so did our Peasant show himself among us; “a soul like an Æolian harp, in whose strings the vulgar wind, as it passed through them, changed itself into articulate melody.”¹ And this was he for whom the world found no fitter business than quarrelling with smugglers and vintners, computing excise-dues upon tallow, and gauging ale-barrels! In such toils was that mighty Spirit sorrowfully wasted: and a hundred years may pass on before another such is given us to waste.

All that remains of Burns, the Writings he has left, seem to us, as we hinted above, no more than a poor mutilated fraction of what was in him; brief, broken glimpses of a genius that could never show itself complete; that wanted all things for completeness: culture, leisure, true effort, nay even length of life. His poems are, with scarcely any exception, mere occasional effusions; poured forth with little premeditation; expressing, by such means as offered, the passion, opinion, or humor of the hour. Never in one instance was it permitted him to grapple with

¹ The figure is a favorite one with Burns; see, for example, the passage quoted below, page 30. The present quotation may be from Richter (compare p. 81), in whom, according to Mr. Boynton, the figure is also frequent.

any subject with the full collection of his strength, to fuse and mould it in the concentrated fire of his genius. To try by the strict rules of Art such imperfect fragments, would be at once unprofitable and unfair. Nevertheless, there is something in these poems, marred and defective as they are, which forbids the most fastidious student of poetry to pass them by. Some sort of enduring quality they must have: for after fifty years of the wildest vicissitudes in poetic taste, they still continue to be read; nay are read more and more eagerly, more and more extensively; and this not only by literary virtuosos, and that class upon whom transitory causes operate most strongly, but by all classes, down to the most hard, unlettered and truly natural class, who read little, and especially no poetry, except because they find pleasure in it. The grounds of so singular and wide a popularity, which extends, in a literal sense, from the palace to the hut, and over all regions where the English tongue is spoken, are well worth inquiring into. After every just deduction, it seems to imply some rare excellence in these works. What is that excellence?

To answer this question will not lead us far. The excellence of Burns is, indeed, among the rarest, whether in poetry or prose; but, at the same time, it is plain and easily recognized: his *Sincerity*, his indisputable air of Truth. Here are no fabulous woes or joys; no hollow fantastic sentimentalities; no wire-drawn refinings, either in thought or feeling: the passion that is traced before us has glowed in a living heart; the opinion he utters has risen in his own understanding, and been a light to his own steps. He does not write from hearsay, but from sight and experience; it is the scenes that he has lived and labored

amidst, that he describes: those scenes, rude and humble as they are, have kindled beautiful emotions in his soul, noble thoughts, and definite resolves; and he speaks forth what is in him, not from any outward call of vanity or interest, but because his heart is too full to be silent. He speaks it with such melody and modulation as he can; "in homely rustic jingle;" but it is his own, and genuine. This is the grand secret for finding readers and retaining them: let him who would move and convince others, be first moved and convinced himself. Horace's rule, *Si vis me flere*,¹ is applicable in a wider sense than the literal one. To every poet, to every writer, we might say: Be true, if you would be believed. Let a man but speak forth with genuine earnestness the thought, the emotion, the actual condition of his own heart; and other men, so strangely are we all knit together by the tie of sympathy, must and will give heed to him. In culture, in extent of view, we may stand above the speaker, or below him; but in either case, his words, if they are earnest and sincere, will find some response within us; for in spite of all casual varieties in outward rank or inward, as face answers to face, so does the heart of man to man.²

This may appear a very simple principle, and one

¹ " Ut ridentibus arrident, ita flentibus adflent
Humani voltus; si vis me flere, dolendum est
Primum ipsi tibi."

— *Ars Poetica*, 101-103.

" As men's faces laugh with those that laugh, so they weep with those that weep; if thou wouldest have me weep, thou must first feel grief thyself."

² Sincerity is the test by which Carlyle judges all men; praise of it is one of the keynotes of his writings. Unfortunately he often confounds it with mere brute force of character and fixity of purpose.

which Burns had little merit in discovering. True, the discovery is easy enough: but the practical appliance is not easy; is indeed the fundamental difficulty which all poets have to strive with, and which scarcely one in the hundred ever fairly surmounts. A head too dull to discriminate the true from the false; a heart too dull to love the one at all risks, and to hate the other in spite of all temptations, are alike fatal to a writer. With either, or as more commonly happens, with both of these deficiencies combine a love of distinction, a wish to be original, which is seldom wanting, and we have Affectation, the bane of literature, as Cant, its elder brother, is of morals. How often does the one and the other front us, in poetry, as in life! Great poets themselves are not always free of this vice; nay it is precisely on a certain sort and degree of greatness that it is most commonly ingrafted. A strong effort after excellence will sometimes solace itself with a mere shadow of success; he who has much to unfold, will sometimes unfold it imperfectly. Byron, for instance, was no common man: yet if we examine his poetry with this view, we shall find it far enough from faultless. Generally speaking, we should say that it is not true. He refreshes us, not with the divine fountain, but too often with vulgar strong waters, stimulating indeed to the taste, but soon ending in dislike, or even nausea. Are his Harolds and Giaours, we would ask, real men; we mean, poetically consistent and conceivable men? Do not these characters, does not the character of their author, which more or less shines through them all, rather appear a thing put on for the occasion; no natural or possible mode of being, but something intended to look much grander than nature?

Surely, all these stormful agonies, this volcanic heroism, superhuman contempt and moody desperation, with so much scowling, and teeth-gnashing, and other sulphurous humor, is more like the brawling of a player in some paltry tragedy, which is to last three hours, than the bearing of a man in the business of life, which is to last threescore and ten years. To our minds there is a taint of this sort, something which we should call theatrical, false, affected, in every one of these otherwise so powerful pieces. Perhaps “*Don Juan*,” especially the latter parts of it, is the only thing approaching to a *sincere* work, he ever wrote; the only work where he showed himself, in any measure, as he was; and seemed so intent on his subject as, for moments, to forget himself. Yet Byron hated this vice; we believe, heartily detested it: nay he had declared formal war against it in words. So difficult is it even for the strongest to make this primary attainment, which might seem the simplest of all: to *read its own consciousness without mistakes*, without errors involuntary or wilful! We recollect no poet of Burns’s susceptibility who comes before us from the first, and abides with us to the last, with such a total want of affectation. He is an honest man, and an honest writer. In his successes and his failures, in his greatness and his littleness, he is ever clear, simple, true, and glitters with no lustre but his own. We reckon this to be a great virtue; to be, in fact, the root of most other virtues, literary as well as moral.

Here, however, let us say, it is to the poetry of Burns that we now allude; to those writings which he had time to meditate, and where no special reason existed to warp his critical feeling, or obstruct his

endeavor to fulfil it. Certain of his Letters, and other fractions of prose composition, by no means deserve this praise. Here, doubtless, there is not the same natural truth of style; but on the contrary, something not only stiff, but strained and twisted; a certain high-flown inflated tone; the stilting emphasis of which contrasts ill with the firmness and rugged simplicity of even his poorest verses. Thus no man, it would appear, is altogether unaffected. Does not Shakespeare himself sometimes premeditate the sheerest bombast! But even with regard to these Letters of Burns, it is but fair to state that he had two excuses. The first was his comparative deficiency in language. Burns, though for most part he writes with singular force and even gracefulness, is not master of English prose, as he is of Scotch verse; not master of it, we mean, in proportion to the depth and vehemence of his matter. These Letters strike us as the effort of a man to express something which he has no organ fit for expressing. But a second and weightier excuse is to be found in the peculiarity of Burns's social rank. His correspondents are often men whose relation to him he has never accurately ascertained; whom therefore he is either forearming himself against, or else unconsciously flattering, by adopting the style he thinks will please them.¹ At all events, we should remember that these faults, even in his Letters, are not the rule, but the exception. Whenever he writes, as one would ever wish

¹ "How perpetually he [Burns] was alive to the dread of being looked down on as a man, even by those who most zealously applauded the works of his genius, might perhaps be traced through the whole sequence of his letters. When writing to men of high station, at least, he preserves, in every instance, the attitude of self-defence." — Lockhart, chap. v.

to do, to trusted friends and on real interests, his style becomes simple, vigorous, expressive, sometimes even beautiful. His letters to Mrs. Dunlop are uniformly excellent.

But we return to his Poetry. In addition to its Sincerity, it has another peculiar merit, which indeed is but a mode, or perhaps a means, of the foregoing: this displays itself in his choice of subjects; or rather in his indifference as to subjects, and the power he has of making all subjects interesting. The ordinary poet, like the ordinary man, is forever seeking in external circumstances the help which can be found only in himself. In what is familiar and near at hand, he discerns no form or comeliness: home is not poetical but prosaic; it is in some past, distant, conventional heroic world, that poetry resides; were he there and not here, were he thus and not so, it would be well with him. Hence our innumerable host of rose-colored Novels and iron-mailed Epics, with their locality not on the Earth, but somewhere nearer to the Moon. Hence our Virgins of the Sun, and our Knights of the Cross, malicious Saracens in turbans, and copper-colored Chiefs in wampum, and so many other truculent figures from the heroic times or the heroic climates, who on all hands swarm in our poetry. Peace be with them! But yet, as a great moralist proposed preaching to the men of this century, so would we fain preach to the poets, "a sermon on the duty of staying at home." Let them be sure that heroic ages and heroic climates can do little for them. That form of life has attraction for us, less because it is better or nobler than our own, than simply because it is different; and even this attraction must be of the most transient

sort. For will not our own age, one day, be an ancient one; and have as quaint a costume as the rest; not contrasted with the rest, therefore, but ranked along with them, in respect of quaintness? Does Homer interest us now, because he wrote of what passed beyond his native Greece, and two centuries before he was born; or because he wrote what passed in God's world, and in the heart of man, which is the same after thirty centuries? Let our poets look to this: is their feeling really finer, truer, and their vision deeper than that of other men,—they have nothing to fear, even from the humblest subject; is it not so,—they have nothing to hope, but an ephemeral favor, even from the highest.¹

The poet, we imagine, can never have far to seek for a subject: the elements of his art are in him, and around him on every hand; for him the Ideal world is not remote from the Actual, but under it and within it: nay he is a poet, precisely because he can discern it there. Wherever there is a sky above him, and a world around him, the poet is in his place; for here too is man's existence, with its infinite longings and small acquirings; its ever-thwarted, ever-renewed endeavors; its unspeakable aspirations, its fears and hopes that wander through Eternity; and all the mystery of brightness and of gloom that it was ever made of, in any age or climate, since man first began

¹ Scott, Byron, Moore, Southey, and Cooper are the most obvious objects of this attack; but they had a host of imitators. Carlyle, because of his intense moral earnestness, had no sympathy with literature written only to give amusement, regardless of truth to life. As usual, his view, though stimulating, is one-sided. Many of the most justly famous books, notably the *Arabian Nights*, are great by the pure charm of incident and invention.

to live. Is there not the fifth act of a Tragedy in every deathbed, though it were a peasant's, and a bed of heath? And are wooings and weddings obsolete, that there can be Comedy no longer? Or are men suddenly grown wise, that Laughter must no longer shake his sides, but be cheated of his Farce? Man's life and nature is, as it was, and as it will ever be. But the poet must have an eye to read these things, and a heart to understand them; or they come and pass away before him in vain. He is a *vates*, a seer; a gift of vision has been given him. Has life no meanings for him, which another cannot equally decipher? then he is no poet, and Delphi itself will not make him one.

In this respect, Burns, though not perhaps absolutely a great poet, better manifests his capability, better proves the truth of his genius, than if he had by his own strength kept the whole Minerva Press¹ going, to the end of his literary course. He shows himself at least a poet of Nature's own making; and Nature, after all, is still the grand agent in making poets. We often hear of this and the other external condition being requisite for the existence of a poet. Sometimes it is a certain sort of training; he must have studied certain things, studied, for instance, "the elder dramatists," and so learned a poetic language; as if poetry lay in the tongue, not in the heart. At other times we are told he must be bred in a certain rank, and must be on a confidential footing with the higher classes; because, above all things, he must see the world. As to seeing the world, we

¹ "A printing-house in London, which was noted in the eighteenth century for the publication of trashy sentimental novels." — *Century Dictionary of Names*.

apprehend this will cause him little difficulty, if he have but eyesight to see it with. Without eyesight, indeed, the task might be hard. The blind or the purblind man “travels from Dan to Beersheba, and finds it all barren.” But happily every poet is born *in* the world; and sees it, with or against his will, every day and every hour he lives. The mysterious workmanship of man’s heart, the true light and the inscrutable darkness of man’s destiny, reveal themselves not only in capital cities and crowded saloons, but in every hut and hamlet where men have their abode. Nay, do not the elements of all human virtues and all human vices; the passions at once of a Borgia and of a Luther, lie written, in stronger or fainter lines, in the consciousness of every individual bosom, that has practised honest self-examination? Truly, this same world may be seen in Mossiel and Tarbolton, if we look well, as clearly as it ever came to light in Crockford’s,¹ or the Tuilleries itself.

But sometimes still harder requisitions are laid on the poor aspirant to poetry; for it is hinted that he should have *been born* two centuries ago; inasmuch as poetry, about that date, vanished from the earth, and became no longer attainable by men!² Such cobweb speculations have, now and then, overhung the field of literature; but they obstruct not the growth of any plant there: the Shakespeare or the Burns, unconsciously and merely as he walks onward, silently brushes them away. Is not every genius an impossibility till he appear? Why do we call him new and original, if *we* saw where his marble was lying, and what fabric he could rear from it? It is

¹ A famous gaming club-house in London.

² The reference is to Macaulay, essay on Milton.

not the material but the workman that is wanting. It is not the dark *place* that hinders, but the dim *eye*. A Scottish peasant's life was the meanest and rudest of all lives, till Burns became a poet in it, and a poet of it; found it a *man's* life, and therefore significant to men. A thousand battlefields remain unsung; but the "Wounded Hare" has not perished without its memorial; a balm of mercy yet breathes on us from its dumb agonies, because a poet was there. Our "Halloween" had passed and repassed, in rude awe and laughter, since the era of the Druids; but no Theocritus, till Burns, discerned in it the materials of a Scottish Idyl: neither was the "Holy Fair" any Council of Trent or Roman Jubilee; but nevertheless, Superstition and Hypocrisy and Fun having been propitious to him, in this man's hand it became a poem, instinct with satire and genuine comic life.¹ Let but the true poet be given us, we repeat it, place him where and how you will, and true poetry will not be wanting.

Independently of the essential gift of poetic feeling, as we have now attempted to describe it, a certain rugged sterling worth pervades whatever Burns has written; a virtue, as of green fields and mountain breezes, dwells in his poetry; it is redolent of natural life and hardy natural men. There is a decisive strength in him, and yet a sweet native gracefulness: he is tender, he is vehement, yet without constraint or too visible effort; he melts the heart, or inflames it, with a power which seems habitual and familiar to him. We see that in this man there was

¹ The two poems, *Halloween* and *The Holy Fair*, must be read to understand the references. Any encyclopædia will explain the Council of Trent and the Roman Jubilee.

the gentleness, the trembling pity of a woman, with the deep earnestness, the force and passionate ardor of a hero. Tears lie in him, and consuming fire; as lightning lurks in the drops of the summer cloud. He has a resonance in his bosom for every note of human feeling; the high and the low, the sad, the ludicrous, the joyful, are welcome in their turns to his “lightly-moved and all-conceiving spirit.” And observe with what a fierce prompt force he grasps his subject, be it what it may! How he fixes, as it were, the full image of the matter in his eye; full and clear in every lineament; and catches the real type and essence of it, amid a thousand accidents and superficial circumstances, no one of which misleads him! Is it of reason; some truth to be discovered? No sophistry, no vain surface-logic detains him; quick, resolute, unerring, he pierces through into the marrow of the question; and speaks his verdict with an emphasis that cannot be forgotten. Is it of description; some visual object to be represented? No poet of any age or nation is more graphic than Burns: the characteristic features disclose themselves to him at a glance; three lines from his hand and we have a likeness. And, in that rough dialect, in that rude, often awkward metre, so clear and definite a likeness! It seems a draughtsman working with a burnt stick; and yet the burin of a Retzsch¹ is not more expressive or exact.

Of² this last excellence, the plainest and most com-

¹ Carlyle had little interest in the fine arts for their own sake; perhaps he was attracted to Retzsch by his illustrations of Schiller and Goethe.

² The passage beginning here, and extending through the quotation on page 27, is not found in the *Edinburgh Review*.

prehensive of all, being indeed the root and foundation of *every* sort of talent, poetical or intellectual, we could produce innumerable instances from the writings of Burns. Take these glimpses of a snowstorm from his “Winter Night” (the italics are ours):—

When biting Boreas, fell and doure,
Sharp shivers thro’ the leafless bow’r,
 And Phœbus *gies a short-liv’d glower*
Far south the lift,
Dim-dark’ning thro’ the *flaky show’r*
Or whirling drift:

’Ae night the storm the steeples rock’d,
 Poor labour sweet in sleep was lock’d,
 While burns *wi’ snawy wreaths upchok’d*
Wild-eddying swirl, .
 Or thro’ the mining outlet bock’d¹
 Down headlong hurl.

Are there not “descriptive touches” here? The describer *saw* this thing; the essential feature and true likeness of every circumstance in it; saw, and not with the eye only. “Poor labour locked in sweet sleep;” the dead stillness of man, unconscious, vanquished, yet not unprotected, while such strife of the material elements rages, and seems to reign supreme in loneliness: this is of the heart as well as of the eye!—Look also at his image of a thaw, and prophesied fall of the “Auld Brig:”—

When heavy, dark, continued, a’-day rains
 Wi’ deepening deluges o’erflow the plains;
 When from the hills where springs the brawling Coil,
 Or stately Lugar’s *mossy* fountains *boil*,
 Or where the Greenock winds his *moorland* course,
 Or haunted Garpal² draws his feeble source,

¹ *Bock’d*, vomited.

² *Fabulosus Hydaspes!* [Note by Carlyle] see *Horace: Odes*, I. 22.

Arous'd by blust'ring winds and spotting thowes,¹
*In mony a torrent down his snaw-broo rowes;*²
*While crashing ice, borne on the roaring speat;*³
Sweeps dams and mills and brigs a' to the gate;
And from Glenbuck down to the Rottonkey,
Auld Ayr is just one lengthen'd *tumbling sea* ;
Then down ye 'll hurl, Deil nor ye never rise !
And dash the gumlie jaups⁴ up to the pouring skies.⁵

The last line is in itself a Poussin-picture of that Deluge! The welkin has, as it were, bent down with its weight; the “gumlie jaups” and the “pouring skies” are mingled together; it is a world of rain and ruin. — In respect of mere clearness and minute fidelity, the *Farmer's* commendation of his *Auld Mare* in plough or in cart, may vie with Homer's Smithy of the Cyclops, or yoking of Priam's Chariot.⁶ Nor have we forgotten stout Burn-the-wind⁷ and his brawny customers, inspired by Scotch Drink: but it is needless to multiply examples. One other trait of a much finer sort we select from multitudes of such among his “Songs.” It gives, in a single line, to the saddest feeling the saddest environment and local habitation: —

*The pale Moon is setting beyond the white wave,
And time is setting wi' me, O;*

¹ Thaws that melt the snow in spots.

² Rolls.

³ Spate, torrent.

⁴ Muddy splashes.

⁵ From *The Brigs of Ayr*. It is the fall of the new brig that is prophesied: a strange slip on Carlyle's part.

⁶ See *Iliad*, xviii. and xxii. Pope's translation may be bought for a few cents; and is still in many ways the best.

⁷ A name for a blacksmith, shortened to *Burnewin*, in *Scotch Drink*.

Farewell, false friends ! false lover, farewell !
I 'll nae mair trouble them nor thee, O.¹

This clearness of sight we have called the foundation of all talent; for in fact, unless we *see* our object, how shall we know how to place or prize it, in our understanding, our imagination, our affections? Yet it is not in itself, perhaps, a very high excellence; but capable of being united indifferently with the strongest, or with ordinary power. Homer surpasses all men in this quality: but strangely enough, at no great distance below him are Richardson and Defoe. It belongs, in truth, to what is called a lively mind; and gives no sure indication of the higher endowments that may exist along with it. In all the three cases we have mentioned, it is combined with great garrulity; their descriptions are detailed, ample and lovingly exact; Homer's fire bursts through, from time to time, as if by accident; but Defoe and Richardson have no fire. Burns, again, is not more distinguished by the clearness than by the impetuous force of his conceptions. Of the strength, the piercing emphasis with which he thought, his emphasis of expression may give a humble but the readiest proof. Whoever uttered sharper sayings than his; words more memorable, now by their burning vehemence, now by their cool vigor and laconic pith? A single phrase depicts a whole subject, a whole scene. We hear of "a gentleman that derived his patent of nobility direct

¹ These lines are incorrectly quoted from an Irish song altered by Burns, *Open the Door to Me, oh!* They should read :

"The wan Moon is setting behind the white wave,
And Time is setting with me, oh :
False friends, false love, farewell ! for mair
I 'll ne'er trouble them nor thee, oh."

from Almighty God." Our Scottish forefathers in the battlefield struggled forward "*red-wat-shod*:"¹ in this one word a full vision of horror and carnage, perhaps too frightfully accurate for Art!

In fact, one of the leading features in the mind of Burns is this vigor of his strictly intellectual perceptions. A resolute force is ever visible in his judgments, and in his feelings and volitions. Professor Stewart says of him, with some surprise:² "All the faculties of Burns's mind were, as far as I could judge, equally vigorous; and his predilection for poetry was rather the result of his own enthusiastic and impassioned temper, than of a genius exclusively adapted to that species of composition. From his conversation I should have pronounced him to be fitted to excel in whatever walk of ambition he had chosen to exert his abilities." But this, if we mistake not, is at all times the very essence of a truly poetical endowment. Poetry, except in such cases as that of Keats, where the whole consists in a weak-eyed maudlin sensibility, and a certain vague random tunefulness of nature, is no separate faculty, no organ which can be superadded to the rest, or disjoined from them; but rather the result of their general harmony and completion.³ The feelings, the gifts

¹ *To William Simpson.* *Wat, wet.*

² Dugald Stewart, professor of moral philosophy in the University of Edinburgh, in a letter published in the *Life of Burns*, by Dr. James Currie.

³ In this sentence, as printed in the *Edinburgh Review*, we have certainly a trace of Jeffrey's editing (cf. above, p. 7). There, by the change of *weak-eyed maudlin* into *extreme*, and of *random* into *pervading*, the sneer is converted into a compliment. Elsewhere Carlyle says of Keats: "The kind of man he was gets ever more horrible to me. Force of hunger for pleasure of

that exist in the Poet are those that exist, with more or less development, in every human soul: the imagination, which shudders at the Hell of Dante, is the same faculty, weaker in degree, which called that picture into being. How does the Poet speak to men, with power, but by being still more a man than they? Shakespeare, it has been well observed, in the planning and completing of his tragedies, has shown an understanding, were it nothing more, which might have governed states, or indited a "Novum Organum." What Burns's force of understanding may have been, we have less means of judging: it had to dwell among the humblest objects; never saw Philosophy; never rose, except by natural effort and for short intervals, into the region of great ideas. Nevertheless, sufficient indication, if no proof sufficient, remains for us in his works: we discern the brawny movements of a gigantic though untutored strength; and can understand how, in conversation, his quick sure insight into men and things may, as much as aught else about him, have amazed the best thinkers of his time and country.

But, unless we mistake, the intellectual gift of Burns is fine as well as strong. The more delicate relations of things could not well have escaped his eye, for they were intimately present to his heart. The logic of the senate and the forum is indispensable, but not all-sufficient; nay perhaps the highest Truth is that which will the most certainly elude it. For

every kind, and want of all other force. . . . Such a structure of soul, it would once have been very evident, was a chosen 'Vessel of Hell.'" (Nichol: *Life of Carlyle*, chap. v.) Such is the absurd result to which Carlyle is led by his view of the necessity of a moral aim in all literature.

this logic works by words, and “the highest,” it has been said, “cannot be expressed in words.” We are not without tokens of an openness for this higher truth also, of a keen though uncultivated sense for it, having existed in Burns. Mr. Stewart, it will be remembered, “wonders,” in the passage above quoted, that Burns had formed some distinct conception of the “doctrine of association.” We rather think that far subtler things than the doctrine of association had from of old been familiar to him. Here for instance:—

“We know nothing,” thus writes he, “or next to nothing, of the structure of our souls, so we cannot account for those seeming caprices in them, that one should be particularly pleased with this thing, or struck with that, which, on minds of a different cast, makes no extraordinary impression. I have some favorite flowers in spring, among which are the mountain-daisy, the harebell, the foxglove, the wild-brier rose, the budding birch, and the hoary hawthorn, that I view and hang over with particular delight. I never hear the loud solitary whistle of the curlew in a summer noon, or the wild mixing cadence of a troop of gray plover in an autumnal morning, without feeling an elevation of soul like the enthusiasm of devotion or poetry. Tell me, my dear friend, to what can this be owing? Are we a piece of machinery, which, like the Æolian harp, passive, takes the impression of the passing accident; or do these workings argue something within us above the trodden clod? I own myself partial to such proofs of those awful and important realities: a God that made all things, man’s immaterial and immortal nature,

and a world of weal or woe beyond death and the grave.”¹

Force and fineness of understanding are often spoken of as something different from general force and fineness of nature, as something partly independent of them. The necessities of language so require it; but in truth these qualities are not distinct and independent: except in special cases, and from special causes, they ever go together. A man of strong understanding is generally a man of strong character; neither is delicacy in the one kind often divided from delicacy in the other. No one, at all events, is ignorant that in the Poetry of Burns keenness of insight keeps pace with keenness of feeling; that his *light* is not more pervading than his *warmth*. He is a man of the most impassioned temper; with passions not strong only, but noble, and of the sort in which great virtues and great poems take their rise. It is reverence, it is love towards all Nature that inspires him, that opens his eyes to its beauty, and makes heart and voice eloquent in its praise. There is a true old saying, that “Love furthers knowledge:” but above all, it is the living essence of that knowledge which makes poets; the first principle of its existence, increase, activity. Of Burns’s fervid affection, his generous all-embracing Love, we have spoken already, as of the grand distinction of his nature, seen equally in word and deed, in his Life and in his Writings. It were easy to multiply examples. Not man only, but all that environs man in the material and moral universe, is lovely in his sight: “the hoary hawthorn,” the “troop of gray plover,” the “solitary

¹ Letter to Mrs. Dunlop, January 1, 1789. The passage is also quoted in Lockhart, chap. viii.

curlew," all are dear to him; all live in this Earth along with him, and to all he is knit as in mysterious brotherhood. How touching is it, for instance, that, amidst the gloom of personal misery, brooding over the wintry desolation without him and within him, he thinks of the "ourie cattle" and "silly sheep," and their sufferings in the pitiless storm!

I thought me on the ourie cattle,
 Or silly sheep, wha bide this brattle
 O' wintry war,
 Or thro' the drift, deep-lairing, sprattle,¹
 Beneath a seaur.
 Ilk happing bird, wee helpless thing,
 That in the merry months o' spring
 Delighted me to hear thee sing,
 What comes o' thee ?
 Where wilt thou cow'r thy chittering wing ?
 And close thy ee ?²

The tenant of the mean hut, with its "ragged roof and chinky wall,"³ has a heart to pity even these! This is worth several homilies on Mercy; for it is the voice of Mercy herself. Burns, indeed, lives in sympathy; his soul rushes forth into all realms of being; nothing that has existence can be indifferent to him. The very Devil he cannot hate with right orthodoxy:—

But fare you weel, auld Nickie-ben ;
 O, wad ye tak a thought and men' !
 Ye aiblins might — I dinna ken, —
 Still hae a stake ;
 I 'm wae to think upo' you den,
 Even for your sake !⁴

"He is the father of curses and lies," said Dr. Slop;

¹ Struggle.

³ *Ibid.*

² *A Winter Night.*

⁴ *Address to the Deil.*

“and is cursed and damned already.”—“I am sorry for it,” quoth my uncle Toby!¹—a Poet without Love were a physical and metaphysical impossibility.

But² has it not been said, in contradiction to this principle, that “Indignation makes verses”?³ It has been so said, and is true enough: but the contradiction is apparent, not real. The Indignation which makes verses is, properly speaking, an inverted Love; the love of some right, some worth, some goodness, belonging to ourselves or others, which has been injured, and which this tempestuous feeling issues forth to defend and avenge. No selfish fury of heart, existing there as a primary feeling, and without its opposite, ever produced much Poetry: otherwise, we suppose, the Tiger were the most musical of all our choristers. Johnson said, he loved a good hater; by which he must have meant, not so much one that hated violently, as one that hated wisely; hated baseness from love of nobleness. However, in spite of Johnson’s paradox, tolerable enough for once in speech, but which need not have been so often adopted in print since then, we rather believe that good men deal sparingly in hatred, either wise or unwise: nay that a “good” hater is still a desideratum in this world. The Devil, at least, who passes for the chief

¹ The quotation is from *Tristram Shandy*, vol. iii. chap. xi. In the *Edinburgh Review* it is preceded by the sentence: “He did not know, probably, that Sterne had been beforehand with him.” As a matter of fact, Burns was well acquainted with Sterne; and it is perhaps for that reason that Carlyle omitted the line when this essay was reprinted, even though he thereby made a very abrupt transition.

² The two following paragraphs, including the quotation from Burns, were not in the essay as printed in the *Edinburgh Review*.

³ “Facit indignatio versum.”—*Juvenal*, I. 79.

and best of that class, is said to be nowise an amiable character.¹

Of the verses which Indignation makes, Burns has also given us specimens: and among the best that were ever given. Who will forget his “Dweller in yon Dungeon dark;” a piece that might have been chanted by the Furies of Aeschylus? The secrets of the infernal Pit are laid bare; a boundless baleful “darkness visible;”² and streaks of hell-fire quivering madly in its black haggard bosom!

Dweller in yon Dungeon dark,
 Hangman of Creation, mark !
 Who in widow’s weeds appears,
 Laden with unhonoured years,
 Noosing with care a bursting purse,
 Baited with many a deadly curse !³

Why should we speak of “Scots wha hae wi’ Wallace bled;” since all know of it, from the king to the meanest of his subjects? This dithyrambic was composed on horseback; in riding in the middle of tempests, over the wildest Galloway moor, in company with a Mr. Syme, who, observing the poet’s looks, forbore to speak, — judiciously enough, for a man composing “Bruce’s Address” might be unsafe to trifle with. Doubtless this stern hymn was singing itself, as he formed it, through the soul of Burns; but to the external ear, it should be sung with the throat

¹ Dr. Johnson said of his friend Dr. Bathurst : “Dear Bathurst was a man to my very heart’s content; he hated a fool, and he hated a rogue, and he hated a Whig. He was a very good hater.” — Piozzi’s *Anecdotes of Dr. Johnson*. Carlyle himself, in his scornful epigrams at men and institutions that seemed to him false and insincere, is a near approach to a “good hater.”

² Cf. *Paradise Lost*, I. 63.

³ *Ode, Sacred to the Memory of Mrs. Oswald.*

of the whirlwind.¹ So long as there is warm blood in the heart of Scotchman or man, it will move in fierce thrills under this war-ode; the best, we believe, that was ever written by any pen.

Another wild stormful Song, that dwells in our ear and mind with a strange tenacity, is "Macpherson's Farewell." Perhaps there is something in the tradition itself that coöperates. For was not this grim Celt, this shaggy Northland Cæus,² that "lived a life of sturt and strife, and died by treacherie,"—was not he too one of the Nimrods and Napoleons of the earth, in the arena of his own remote misty glens, for want of a clearer and wider one? Nay, was there not a touch of grace given him? A fibre of love and softness, of poetry itself, must have lived in his savage heart: for he composed that air the night before his execution; on the wings of that poor melody his better soul would soar away above oblivion, pain and all the ignominy and despair, which, like an avalanche, was hurling him to the abyss! Here also, as at Thebes, and in Pelops' line,³ was material Fate matched against man's Free-will; matched in bitterest though obscure duel; and the ethereal soul sank not, even in its blindness, without a cry which has survived it. But who, except Burns, could have given words to such a soul; words that we never lis-

¹ The authority for this account is a letter from Mr. Syme, printed in Currie's *Life*. Burns himself sent *Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled* to Thomson September 1, 1793, in company with a letter, in which he says that the song was composed on an evening walk the day before.

² See Virgil, *Aeneid*, viii. 185-279.

³ The reference is to Milton's *Il Penseroso*. The struggle of fate and man's free will is the central idea of the typical Greek tragedies.

ten to without a strange half-barbarous, half-poetic fellow-feeling?

Sae rantingly, sae wantonly,
Sae dauntingly gaed he ;
He play'd a spring, and danced it round,
Below the gallows-tree.

Under a lighter disguise, the same principle of Love, which we have recognized as the great characteristic of Burns, and of all true poets, occasionally manifests itself in the shape of Humor. Everywhere, indeed, in his sunny moods, a full buoyant flood of mirth rolls through the mind of Burns; he rises to the high, and stoops to the low, and is brother and playmate to all Nature. We speak not of his bold and often irresistible faculty of caricature; for this is Drollery rather than Humor: but a much tenderer sportfulness dwells in him; and comes forth here and there, in evanescent and beautiful touches; as in his “Address to the Mouse,” or the “Farmer’s Mare,” or in his “Elegy on poor Mailie,” which last may be reckoned his happiest effort of this kind. In these pieces there are traits of a Humor as fine as that of Sterne;¹ yet altogether different, original, peculiar,—the Humor of Burns.

Of the tenderness, the playful pathos, and many other kindred qualities of Burns’s Poetry, much more might be said; but now, with these poor outlines of a sketch, we must prepare to quit this part of our subject. To speak of his individual Writings, adequately and with any detail, would lead us far beyond our limits. As already hinted, we can look on

¹ *Tristram Shandy* was one of Carlyle’s favorite books : Sterne probably appealed to him by his humor and kindness. Cf. p. 33, above.

but few of these pieces as, in strict critical language, deserving the name of Poems: they are rhymed eloquence, rhymed pathos, rhymed sense; yet seldom essentially melodious, aerial, poetical. "Tam o' Shanter" itself, which enjoys so high a favor, does not appear to us at all decisively to come under this last category. It is not so much a poem, as a piece of sparkling rhetoric; the heart and body of the story still lies hard and dead. He has not gone back, much less carried us back, into that dark, earnest, wondering age, when the tradition was believed, and when it took its rise; he does not attempt, by any new-modelling of his supernatural ware, to strike anew that deep mysterious chord of human nature, which once responded to such things; and which lives in us too, and will forever live, though silent now, or vibrating with far other notes, and to far different issues. Our German readers will understand us, when we say, that he is not the Tieck but the Musäus of this tale.¹ Externally it is all green and living; yet look closer, it is no firm growth, but only ivy on a rock. The piece does not properly cohere: the strange chasm which yawns in our incredulous imaginations between the Ayr publichouse and the gate of Tophet, is nowhere bridged over, nay the idea of such a bridge is laughed at; and thus the Tragedy of the adventure becomes a mere drunken phantasmagoria, or many-colored spectrum painted on ale-vapors, and the Farce

¹ Both Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853) and Johann Karl August Musäus (1735–1787) worked with materials drawn from popular legend. But Musäus, in his most famous work, *Volksmärchen der Deutschen* (*German Folk-Tales*), could not keep from introducing his own satirical tone. Thus the book lacks the simplicity of genuine folk-lore. Remember that Carlyle had already published translations from both these men.

alone has any reality. We do not say that Burns should have made much more of this tradition; we rather think that, for strictly poetical purposes, not much *was* to be made of it. Neither are we blind to the deep, varied, genial power displayed in what he has actually accomplished; but we find far more "Shakespearean" qualities, as these of "Tam o' Shanter" have been fondly named, in many of his other pieces; nay we incline to believe that this latter might have been written, all but quite as well, by a man who, in place of genius, had only possessed talent.

Perhaps we may venture to say, that the most strictly poetical of all his "poems" is one which does not appear in Currie's Edition; but has been often printed before and since, under the humble title of "The Jolly Beggars." The subject truly is among the lowest in Nature; but it only the more shows our Poet's gift in raising it into the domain of Art. To our minds, this piece seems thoroughly compacted; melted together, refined; and poured forth in one flood of true *liquid* harmony. It is light, airy, soft of movement; yet sharp and precise in its details; every face is a portrait: that *raucle carlin*,¹ that *wee Apollo*, that *Son of Mars*, are Scottish, yet ideal; the scene is at once a dream, and the very Ragcastle of "Poosie-Nansie."² Farther, it seems in a considerable degree complete, a real self-supporting Whole, which is the highest merit in a poem. The blanket of the Night is drawn asunder for a moment; in full, ruddy, flaming light, these rough tatterdemalions are seen in their boisterous revel; for the strong pulse of

¹ Fearless crone.

² The scene of *The Jolly Beggars* was an actual tavern in Mauchline, kept by a Mrs. Gibson, called "Poosie-Nansie."

Life vindicates its right to gladness even here; and when the curtain closes, we prolong the action, without effort; the next day as the last, our *Caird* and our *Balladmonger* are singing and soldiering; their "brats and callets" are hawking, begging, cheating; and some other night, in new combinations, they will wring from Fate another hour of wassail and good cheer. Apart from the universal sympathy with man which this again bespeaks in Burns, a genuine inspiration and no inconsiderable technical talent are manifested here. There is the fidelity, humor, warm life and accurate painting and grouping of some Teniers,¹ for whom hostlers and carousing peasants are not without significance. It would be strange, doubtless, to call this the best of Burns's writings: we mean to say only, that it seems to us the most perfect of its kind, as a piece of poetical composition, strictly so called. In "The Beggar's Opera,"² in the "Beggar's Bush,"³ as other critics⁴ have already remarked, there is nothing which, in real poetic vigor, equals this *Cantata*; nothing, as we think, which comes within many degrees of it.

But by far the most finished, complete and truly inspired pieces of Burns are, without dispute, to be found among his "Songs." It is here that, although through a small aperture, his light shines with least obstruction; in its highest beauty and pure sunny clearness. The reason may be, that Song is a brief simple species of composition; and requires nothing

¹ David Teniers, the Younger (1610–1690).

² By John Gay (1685–1732).

³ By John Fletcher (1579–1625).

⁴ In particular, Lockhart, chap. ix.

so much for its perfection as genuine poetic feeling, genuine music of heart. Yet the Song has its rules equally with the Tragedy; rules which in most cases are poorly fulfilled, in many cases are not so much as felt. We might write a long essay on the Songs of Burns; which we reckon by far the best that Britain has yet produced: for indeed, since the era of Queen Elizabeth, we know not that, by any other hand, aught truly worth attention has been accomplished in this department. True, we have songs enough “by persons of quality;” we have tawdry, hollow, wine-bred madrigals; many a rhymed speech “in the flowing and watery vein of Osorius the Portugal Bishop,”¹ rich in sonorous words, and, for moral, dashed perhaps with some tint of a sentimental sensuality; all which many persons cease not from endeavoring to sing; though for most part, we fear, the music is but from the throat outwards, or at best from some region far enough short of the *Soul*; not in which, but in a certain inane Limbo of the Fancy, or even in some vaporous debatable-land on the outskirts of the Nervous System, most of such madrigals and rhymed speeches seem to have originated.

With the Songs of Burns we must not name these things. Independently of the clear, manly, heartfelt

¹ Jeronymo Osorio (1506–1580), called “the Cicero of Portugal:” “Men began to hunt more after words than matter; more after the choiceness of the phrase, and the round and clean composition of the sentence, and the sweet falling of the clauses, and the varying and illustration of their works with tropes and figures, than after the weight of matter, worth of subject, soundness of argument, life of invention, or depth of judgment. Then grew the flowing and watery vein of Osorius the Portugal bishop, to be in price.” — Bacon: *Of the Advancement of Learning*, I. iv. 2.

sentiment that ever pervades *his* poetry, his Songs are honest in another point of view: in form, as well as in spirit. They do not *affect* to be set to music, but they actually and in themselves are music; they have received their life, and fashioned themselves together, in the medium of Harmony, as Venus rose from the bosom of the sea. The story, the feeling, is not detailed, but suggested; not *said*, or spouted, in rhetorical completeness and coherence; but *sung*, in fitful gushes, in glowing hints, in fantastic breaks, in *warblings* not of the voice only, but of the whole mind. We consider this to be the essence of a song; and that no songs since the little careless catches, and as it were drops of song, which Shakespeare has here and there sprinkled over his Plays, fulfil this condition in nearly the same degree as most of Burns's do. Such grace and truth of external movement, too, presupposes in general a corresponding force and truth of sentiment and inward meaning. The Songs of Burns are not more perfect in the former quality than in the latter. With what tenderness he sings, yet with what vehemence and entireness! There is a piercing wail in his sorrow, the purest rapture in his joy; he burns with the sternest ire, or laughs with the loudest or sliest mirth; and yet he is sweet and soft, "sweet as the smile when fond lovers meet, and soft as their parting tear." If we further take into account the immense variety of his subjects; how, from the loud flowing revel in "Willie brew'd a Peck o' Maut," to the still, rapt enthusiasm of sadness of "Mary in Heaven;" from the glad kind greeting of "Auld Lang Syne," or the comic archness of "Duncan Gray," to the fire-eyed fury of "Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled," he has found a tone and words for

every mood of man's heart,—it will seem a small praise if we rank him as the first of all our Song-writers; for we know not where to find one worthy of being second to him.

It is on his Songs, as we believe, that Burns's chief influence as an author will ultimately be found to depend: nor, if our Fletcher's¹ aphorism is true, shall we account this a small influence. "Let me make the songs of a people," said he, "and you shall make its laws." Surely, if ever any Poet might have equalled himself with Legislators on this ground, it was Burns. His Songs are already part of the mother-tongue, not of Scotland only, but of Britain, and of the millions that in all ends of the earth speak a British language. In hut and hall, as the heart unfolds itself in many-colored joy and woe of existence, the *name*, the *voice* of that joy and that woe, is the name and voice which Burns has given them.

— Strictly speaking, perhaps no British man has so deeply affected the thoughts and feelings of so many men, as this solitary and altogether private individual, with means apparently the humblest. —

In another point of view, moreover, we incline to think that Burns's influence may have been considerable: we mean, as exerted specially on the Literature of his country, at least on the Literature of Scotland. Among the great changes which British, particularly Scottish literature, has undergone since that period, one of the greatest will be found to consist in its re-

¹ Andrew Fletcher, of Saltoun (1655–1716), in his *Account of a Conversation concerning a Right Regulation of Governments for the Common Good of Mankind*, says: "I knew a very wise man" who "believed if a man were permitted to make all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of a nation."

markable increase of nationality. Even the English writers most popular in Burns's time were little distinguished for their literary patriotism, in this its best sense. A certain attenuated cosmopolitanism had, in good measure, taken place of the old insular home-feeling; literature was, as it were, without any local environment; was not nourished by the affections which spring from a native soil. Our Grays and Glovers¹ seemed to write almost as if *in vacuo*; the thing written bears no mark of place; it is not written so much for Englishmen, as for men; or rather, which is the inevitable result of this, for certain Generalizations which philosophy termed men. Goldsmith is an exception: not so Johnson; the scene of his "Rambler" is little more English than that of his "Rasselas."

But if such was, in some degree, the case with England, it was, in the highest degree, the case with Scotland. In fact our Scottish literature had, at that period, a very singular aspect; unexampled, so far as we know, except perhaps at Geneva, where the same state of matters appears still to continue. For a long period after Scotland became British, we had no literature; at the date when Addison and Steele were writing their "Spectators," our good John Boston was writing, with the noblest intent, but alike in defiance of grammar and philosophy, his "Fourfold State

¹ Richard Glover (1712–1785) was once famous for his epic *Leonidas*. There is an account of him, with specimens of his work, in Ward's *English Poets*. Nothing can better illustrate Carlyle's lack of a judicial habit of mind than his coupling Glover's name with Gray's. Read once more the *Elegy written in a Country Churchyard*, and form your own idea of the correctness of Carlyle's opinion.

of Man.”¹ Then came the schisms in our National Church, and the fiercer schisms in our Body Politic: Theologic ink, and Jacobite blood, with gall enough in both cases, seemed to have blotted out the intellect of the country: however, it was only obscured, not obliterated. Lord Kames made nearly the first attempt at writing English; and ere long, Hume, Robertson, Smith, and a whole host of followers, attracted hither the eyes of all Europe. And yet in this brilliant resuscitation of our “fervid genius,” there was nothing truly Scottish, nothing indigenous; except, perhaps, the natural impetuosity of intellect, which we sometimes claim, and are sometimes upbraided with, as a characteristic of our nation. It is curious to remark that Scotland, so full of writers, had no Scottish culture, nor indeed any English; our culture was almost exclusively French. It was by studying Racine and Voltaire, Batteux and Boileau, that Kames had trained himself to be a critic and philosopher; it was the light of Montesquieu and Mably that guided Robertson in his political speculations; Quesnay’s lamp that kindled the lamp of Adam Smith.² Hume was too rich a man to borrow; and perhaps he reacted on the French more than he was acted on by them; but neither had he aught to do with Scotland; Edinburgh, equally with La Flèche,³

¹ Apparently Carlyle’s memory was treacherous, like that of ordinary mortals: man and work are both given incorrectly here. *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, by Thomas Boston (1677–1732), is still a classic of the Calvinistic theology.

² The names are all readily found in any cyclopædia; except possibly that of Charles Batteux (1713–1780), who, as might be inferred from the text, was a French literary critic of the same school as Boileau.

³ At one time Hume’s residence in France, where he composed his *Treatise on Human Nature*.

was but the lodging and laboratory, in which he not so much morally *lived*, as metaphysically *investigated*. Never, perhaps, was there a class of writers so clear and well-ordered, yet so totally destitute, to all appearance, of any patriotic affection, nay of any human affection whatever. The French wits of the period were as unpatriotic: but their general deficiency in moral principle, not to say their avowed sensuality and unbelief in all virtue, strictly so called, render this accountable enough. We hope there is a patriotism founded on something better than prejudice; that our country may be dear to us, without injury to our philosophy; that in loving and justly prizesing all other lands, we may prize justly, and yet love before all others, our own stern Motherland, and the venerable Structure of social and moral Life, which Mind has through long ages been building up for us there. Surely there is nourishment for the better part of man's heart in all this: surely the roots, that have fixed themselves in the very core of man's being, may be so cultivated as to grow up not into briars, but into roses, in the field of his life! Our Scottish sages have no such propensities: the field of their life shows neither briars nor roses; but only a flat, continuous thrashing-floor for Logic, whereon all questions, from the "Doctrine of Rent" to the "Natural History of Religion," are thrashed and sifted with the same mechanical impartiality!¹

With Sir Walter Scott at the head of our literature, it cannot be denied that much of this evil is past, or rapidly passing away: our chief literary men,

¹ Chapter xi. of Book I. of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* has the title *Of the Rent of Land*. *The Natural History of Religion* is by Hume.

whatever other faults they may have, no longer live among us like a French Colony, or some knot of Propaganda Missionaries; but like natural-born subjects of the soil, partaking and sympathizing in all our attachments, humors, and habits. Our literature no longer grows in water but in mould, and with the true racy virtues of the soil and climate. How much of this change may be due to Burns, or to any other individual, it might be difficult to estimate.¹ Direct literary imitation of Burns was not to be looked for. But his example, in the fearless adoption of domestic subjects, could not but operate from afar; and certainly in no heart did the love of country ever burn with a warmer glow than in that of Burns: “a tide of Scottish prejudice,”² as he modestly calls this deep and generous feeling, “had been poured along his veins; and he felt that it would boil there till the flood-gates shut in eternal rest.” It seemed to him, as if *he* could do so little for his country, and yet would so gladly have done all. One small province stood open for him,—that of Scottish Song; and how eagerly he entered on it, how devotedly he labored there! In his toilsome journeyings, this object never quits him; it is the little happy-valley of his careworn heart. In the gloom of his own affliction,

¹ In spite of the example of Burns, the publisher of *Waverley* hesitated for some time to accept the manuscript, on account of the Scotch dialect interwoven in it. Now, on the contrary, a local dialect seems a commendation to a work of fiction.

² Burns, in his autobiographical letter to Dr. Moore (August 2, 1787), says, in reference to *The History of Sir William Wallace*, one of his first books: “The story of Wallace poured a Scotch prejudice in my veins, which will boil along there till the flood-gates of life shut in eternal rest.” The reader will by this time have noticed Carlyle’s carelessness about small points.

he eagerly searches after some lonely brother of the muse, and rejoices to snatch one other name from the oblivion that was covering it!¹ These were early feelings, and they abode with him to the end:—

. . . A wish (I mind its power),
 A wish, that to my latest hour
 Will strongly heave my breast,—
 That I, for poor auld Scotland's sake,
 Some useful plan or book could make,
 Or sing a sang at least.

The rough bur Thistle spreading wide
 Amang the bearded bear,
 I turn'd my weeding-clips aside,
 And spared the symbol dear.²

But to leave the mere literary character of Burns, which has already detained us too long. Far more interesting than any of his written works, as it appears to us, are his acted ones: the Life he willed and was fated to lead among his fellow-men. These Poems are but like little rhymed fragments scattered here and there in the grand unrhymed Romance of his earthly existence; and it is only when intercalated in this at their proper places, that they attain their full measure of significance. And this too, alas! was but a fragment! The plan of a mighty edifice had been sketched; some columns, porticos, firm masses of building, stand completed; the rest more or less clearly indicated; with many a far-stretching

¹ This may refer to Burns's poetical epistles to David Sillar and John Lapraik, obscure poets of his own time; or, more probably, to his erecting a memorial, at his own expense, over the neglected grave of Fergusson.

² *Answer to Verses addressed to the Poet by the Guidwife of Wauchope House.*

tendency, which only studious and friendly eyes can now trace towards the purposed termination. For the work is broken off in the middle, almost in the beginning; and rises among us, beautiful and sad, at once unfinished and a ruin! If charitable judgment was necessary in estimating his Poems, and justice required that the aim and the manifest power to fulfil it must often be accepted for the fulfilment; much more is this the case in regard to his Life, the sum and result of all his endeavors, where his difficulties came upon him not in detail only, but in mass; and so much has been left unaccomplished, nay was mistaken, and altogether marred.

Properly speaking, there is but one era in the life of Burns, and that the earliest. We have not youth and manhood, but only youth: for, to the end, we discern no decisive change in the complexion of his character; in his thirty-seventh year, he is still, as it were, in youth. With all that resoluteness of judgment, that penetrating insight, and singular maturity of intellectual power, exhibited in his writings, (he never attains to any clearness regarding himself;) to the last, he never ascertains his peculiar aim, even with such distinctness as is common among ordinary men; and therefore never can pursue it with that singleness of will which insures success and some contentment to such men.¹ /To the last, he wavers between two purposes: glorying in his talent, like a true poet, he yet cannot consent to make this his chief and sole glory, and to follow it as the one thing needful, through poverty or riches, through good or evil

¹ Burns himself says of his early days, in his autobiographical letter to Dr. Moore : "The great misfortune of my life was never to have an aim."

report.¹ Another far meaner ambition still cleaves to him; he must dream and struggle about a certain "Rock of Independence;" which, natural and even admirable as it might be, was still but a warring with the world, on the comparatively insignificant ground of his being more completely or less completely supplied with money than others; of his standing at a higher or at a lower altitude in general estimation than others. (For the world still appears to him, as to the young, in borrowed colors; he expects from it what it cannot give to any man; seeks for contentment, not within himself, in action and wise effort, but from without, in the kindness of circumstances, in love, friendship, honor, pecuniary ease.) He would be happy, not actively and in himself, but passively and from some ideal cornucopia of Enjoyments, not earned by his own labor, but showered on him by the beneficence of Destiny.) Thus, like a young man, he cannot gird himself up for any worthy well-calculated goal, but swerves to and fro, between passionate hope and remorseful disappointment: rushing onwards

¹ Perhaps Carlyle is misled in his estimate of Burns by his own high conception of the vocation of the man of letters. The profession of literature is hardly older than our own century; Dr. Johnson is really the first example of it. For a man, unsupported by a patron, to make poetry his means of subsistence, was almost unknown in the eighteenth century. Burns was too proud to depend on a patron, and his refusal to accept money for his contributions to Johnson's *Museum* and Thomson's *Scottish Airs* was only in accord with the ideas of his time; besides, he feared that such a proceeding would injure his spontaneity. To receive pay for a volume of poems, originally written without reference to publication, was quite a different matter.

Carlyle, in his lecture on *The Hero as Man of Letters*, in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, develops his own point of view more fully.

with a deep tempestuous force, he surmounts or breaks asunder many a barrier; travels, nay advances far, but advancing only under uncertain guidance, is ever and anon turned from his path; and to the last cannot reach the only true happiness of a man, that of clear decided Activity in the sphere for which, by nature and circumstances, he has been fitted and appointed.

We do not say these things in dispraise of Burns; nay, perhaps, they but interest us the more in his favor. This blessing is not given soonest to the best; but rather, it is often the greatest minds that are latest in obtaining it; for where most is to be developed, most time may be required to develop it. A complex condition had been assigned him from without; as complex a condition from within: no “pre-established harmony” existed between the clay soil of Mossgiel and the empyrean soul of Robert Burns; it was not wonderful that the adjustment between them should have been long postponed, and his arm long cumbered, and his sight confused, in so vast and discordant an economy as he had been appointed steward over. Byron was, at his death, but a year younger than Burns; and through life, as it might have appeared, far more simply situated: yet in him too we can trace no such adjustment, no such moral manhood; but at best, and only a little before his end, the beginning of what seemed such.

By much the most striking incident in Burns's Life is his journey to Edinburgh; but perhaps a still more important one is his residence at Irvine so early as in his twenty-third year. Hitherto his life had been poor and toilworn; but otherwise not ungenial, and, with all its distresses, by no means unhappy. In his

parentage, deducting outward circumstances, he had every reason to reckon himself fortunate. His father was a man of thoughtful, intense, earnest character, as the best of our peasants are; valuing knowledge, possessing some, and, what is far better and rarer, openminded for more: a man with a keen insight and devout heart; reverent towards God, friendly therefore, at once, and fearless towards all that God has made: in one word, though but a hard-handed peasant, a complete and fully unfolded *Man*. Such a father is seldom found in any rank in society; and was worth descending far in society to seek.¹ Unfortunately he was very poor; had he been even a little richer, almost never so little, the whole might have issued far otherwise. Mighty events turn on a straw; the crossing of a brook decides the conquest of the world. Had this William Burns's small seven acres of nursery-ground anywise prospered, the boy Robert had been sent to school; had struggled forward, as so many weaker men do, to some university; come forth not as a rustic wonder, but as a regular well-trained intellectual workman, and changed the whole course of British Literature, — for it lay in him to have done this!² But the nursery did not prosper; poverty sank his whole family below the help of even our cheap school-system: Burns remained a hard-worked ploughboy, and British literature took its own course. Nevertheless, even in this rugged scene there is much to nourish him. If he drudges, it is

¹ Burns himself says of his father: "I have met with few who understood Men, their manners and their ways, equal to him."

² These words seem like a prophecy of Carlyle's own career, which was just beginning when this essay was written.

with his brother, and for his father and mother, whom he loves, and would fain shield from want. Wisdom is not banished from their poor hearth, nor the balm of natural feeling: the solemn words, "Let us worship God," are heard there from a "priest-like father;"¹ if threatenings of unjust men throw mother and children into tears, these are tears not of grief only, but of holiest affection; every heart in that humble group feels itself the closer knit to every other; in their hard warfare they are there together, a "little band of brethren." Neither are such tears, and the deep beauty that dwells in them, their only portion. Light visits the hearts as it does the eyes of all living: there is a force, too, in this youth, that enables him to trample on misfortune; nay to bind it under his feet to make him sport. For a bold, warm, buoyant humor of character has been given him; and so the thick-coming shapes of evil are welcomed with a gay, friendly irony, and in their closest pressure he bates no jot of heart or hope. Vague yearnings of ambition fail not, as he grows up; dreamy fancies hang like cloud-cities around him; the curtain of Existence is slowly rising, in many-colored splendor and gloom: and the auroral light of first love is gilding his horizon, and the music of song is on his path; and so he walks

. . . "in glory and in joy,
Behind his plough, upon the mountain side."²

We ourselves know, from the best evidence, that up to this date Burns was happy; nay that he was

¹ See *The Cotter's Saturday Night*.

² Wordsworth : *Resolution and Independence* (1807 edition). Our editions read : "Following his plough, along the mountain side." The reference in the poem is to Burns.

the gayest, brightest, most fantastic, fascinating being to be found in the world; more so even than he ever afterwards appeared.¹ But now, at this early age, he quits the paternal roof; goes forth into looser, louder, more exciting society; and becomes initiated in those dissipations, those vices, which a certain class of philosophers have asserted to be a natural preparative for entering on active life: a kind of mud-bath, in which the youth is, as it were, necessitated to steep, and, we suppose, cleanse himself, before the real toga of Manhood can be laid on him. We shall not dispute much with this class of philosophers; we hope they are mistaken: for Sin and Remorse so easily beset us at all stages of life, and are always such indifferent company, that it seems hard we should, at any stage, be forced and fated not only to meet but to yield to them, and even serve for a term in their leprous armada. We hope it is not so. Clear we are, at all events, it cannot be the training one receives in this Devil's service, but only our determining to desert from it, that fits us for true manly Action. We become men, not after we have been dissipated, and disappointed in the chase of false pleasure; but after we have ascertained, in any way, what impassable barriers hem us in through this life; how mad it is to hope for contentment to our infinite soul from the *gifts* of this extremely finite world;

¹ Apparently the "best evidence" is conflicting. Burns, in his autobiographical letter to Dr. Moore, says of himself as a boy: "I was, perhaps, the most ungainly, awkward being in the parish." And Murdock, Burns's schoolmaster, in a letter printed in Currie's *Life* and reproduced in Lockhart's, says: "Robert's ear was remarkably dull, and his voice untunable. . . . Robert's countenance was generally grave and expressive of a serious, contemplative, and thoughtful mind."

that a man must be sufficient for himself; and that for suffering and enduring there is no remedy but striving and doing. Manhood begins when we have in any way made truce with necessity; begins even when we have surrendered to necessity, as the most part only do; but begins joyfully and hopefully only when we have reconciled ourselves to Necessity; and thus, in reality, triumphed over it, and felt that in Necessity we are free. Surely such lessons as this last, which, in one shape or other, is the grand lesson for every mortal man, are better learned from the lips of a devout mother, in the looks and actions of a devout father, while the heart is yet soft and pliant, than in collision with the sharp adamant of Fate, attracting us to shipwreck us, when the heart is grown hard, and may be broken before it will become contrite. Had Burns continued to learn this, as he was already learning it, in his father's cottage, he would have learned it fully, which he never did; and been saved many a lasting aberration, many a bitter hour and year of remorseful sorrow.

It seems to us another circumstance of fatal import in Burns's history, that at this time too he became involved in the religious quarrels of his district; that he was enlisted and feasted, as the fighting man of the New-Light Priesthood, in their highly unprofitable warfare. At the tables of these freeminded clergy he learned much more than was needful for him. Such liberal ridicule of fanaticism awakened in his mind scruples about Religion itself; and a whole world of Doubts, which it required quite another set of conjurers than these men to exorcise. We do not say that such an intellect as his could have escaped similar doubts at some period of his history; or even

that he could, at a later period, have come through them altogether victorious and unharmed: but it seems peculiarly unfortunate that this time, above all others, should have been fixed for the encounter. For now, with principles assailed by evil example from without, by "passions raging like demons"¹ from within, he had little need of sceptical misgivings to whisper treason in the heat of the battle, or to cut off his retreat if he were already defeated. He loses his feeling of innocence; his mind is at variance with itself; the old divinity no longer presides there; but wild Desires and wild Repentance alternately oppress him. Ere long, too, he has committed himself before the world; his character for sobriety, dear to a Scottish peasant as few corrupted worldlings can even conceive, is destroyed in the eyes of men; and his only refuge consists in trying to disbelieve his guiltiness, and is but a refuge of lies. The blackest desperation now gathers over him, broken only by red lightnings of remorse. The whole fabric of his life is blasted asunder; for now not only his character, but his personal liberty is to be lost; men and Fortune are leagued for his hurt; "hungry Ruin has him in the wind." He sees no escape but the saddest of all: exile from his loved country, to a country in every sense inhospitable and abhorrent to him. While the "gloomy night is gathering fast,"¹ in mental storm and solitude, as well as in physical, he sings his wild farewell to Scotland:—

Farewell, my friends ; farewell, my foes !
My peace with these, my love with those :

¹ The phrases are drawn from Burns's letter to Dr. Moore.

The bursting tears my heart declare ;
Adieu, my native banks of Ayr !¹

Light breaks suddenly in on him in floods; but still a false transitory light, and no real sunshine. He is invited to Edinburgh; hastens thither with anticipating heart; is welcomed as in a triumph, and with universal blandishment and acclamation; whatever is wisest, whatever is greatest or loveliest there, gathers round him, to gaze on his face, to show him honor, sympathy, affection. Burns's appearance among the sages and nobles of Edinburgh must be regarded as one of the most singular phenomena in modern Literature; almost like the appearance of some Napoleon among the crowned sovereigns of modern Politics. For it is nowise as "a mockery king,"² set there by favor, transiently and for a purpose, that he will let himself be treated, still less is he a mad Rienzi, whose sudden elevation turns his too weak head: but he stands there on his own basis; cool, unastonished, holding his equal rank from Nature herself; putting forth no claim which there is not strength *in* him, as well as about him to vindicate. Mr. Lockhart has some forcible observations on this point:—

"It needs no effort of imagination," says he, "to conceive what the sensations of an isolated set of

¹ *Farewell Song to the Banks of Ayr.* The last line should read :—

Farewell, the bonie banks of Ayr.

² Shakespeare, *Richard II.* iv. 1. Carlyle was a man of enormous reading, and no one can hope to recognize *all* his allusions. But the two books to which he, like most of the great writers of modern England, refers most frequently, are within the reach of every one: they are the Bible and Shakespeare.

scholars (almost all either clergymen or professors) must have been in the presence of this big-boned, black-browed, brawny stranger, with his great flashing eyes, who, having forced his way among them from the plough-tail at a single stride, manifested in the whole strain of his bearing and conversation a most thorough conviction, that in the society of the most eminent men of his nation he was exactly where he was entitled to be; hardly deigned to flatter them by exhibiting even an occasional symptom of being flattered by their notice; by turns calmly measured himself against the most cultivated understandings of his time in discussion; overpowered the *bon-mots* of the most celebrated convivialists by broad floods of merriment, impregnated with all the burning life of genius; astounded bosoms habitually enveloped in the thrice-piled folds of social reserve, by compelling them to tremble, — nay to tremble visibly, — beneath the fearless touch of natural pathos; and all this without indicating the smallest willingness to be ranked among those professional ministers of excitement, who are content to be paid in money and smiles for doing what the spectators and auditors would be ashamed of doing in their own persons, even if they had the power of doing it; and last, and probably worst of all, who was known to be in the habit of enlivening societies which they would have scorned to approach, still more frequently than their own, with eloquence no less magnificent; with wit, in all likelihood still more daring; often enough, as the superiors whom he fronted without alarm might have guessed from the beginning, and had ere long no occasion to guess, with wit pointed at themselves.”¹

¹ Lockhart, chap. v.

The farther we remove from this scene, the more singular will it seem to us: details of the exterior aspect of it are already full of interest. Most readers recollect Mr. Walker's personal interviews with Burns as among the best passages of his Narrative: a time will come when this reminiscence of Sir Walter Scott's, slight though it is, will also be precious:—

“As for Burns,” writes Sir Walter, “I may truly say, *Virgilium vidi tantum.*¹ I was a lad of fifteen in 1786–87, when he came first to Edinburgh, but had sense and feeling enough to be much interested in his poetry, and would have given the world to know him: but I had very little acquaintance with any literary people, and still less with the gentry of the west country, the two sets that he most frequented. Mr. Thomas Grierson was at that time a clerk of my father's. He knew Burns, and promised to ask him to his lodgings to dinner; but had no opportunity to keep his word; otherwise I might have seen more of this distinguished man. As it was, I saw him one day at the late venerable Professor Ferguson's,² where there were several gentlemen of literary reputation, among whom I remember the celebrated Mr. Dugald Stewart. Of course, we youngsters sat silent, looked and listened. The only thing I remember which was remarkable in Burns's manner, was the effect produced upon him by a print of Bunbury's,³ representing a soldier lying dead on the snow, his dog sitting in misery on one side,—on the other, his widow,

¹ Ovid, *Tristia*, IV. x. 51.

² Adam Ferguson (1723–1816), professor of philosophy at Edinburgh University. He was succeeded by Dugald Stewart.

³ Henry William Bunbury (1750–1811) was an amateur artist and caricaturist of some note.

with a child in her arms. These lines were written beneath:—

‘Cold on Canadian hills, or Minden’s plain,
Perhaps that mother wept her soldier slain ;
Bent o’er her babe, her eye dissolved in dew,
The big drops mingling with the milk he drew,
Gave the sad presage of his future years,
The child of misery baptised in tears.’

“Burns seemed much affected by the print, or rather by the ideas which it suggested to his mind. He actually shed tears. He asked whose the lines were; and it chanced that nobody but myself remembered that they occur in a half-forgotten poem of Langhorne’s called by the unpromising title of ‘The Justice of Peace.’¹ I whispered my information to a friend present; he mentioned it to Burns, who rewarded me with a look and a word, which, though of mere civility, I then received and still recollect with very great pleasure.

“His person was strong and robust; his manners rustic, not clownish; a sort of dignified plainness and simplicity, which received part of its effect perhaps from one’s knowledge of his extraordinary talents. His features are represented in Mr. Nasmyth’s² picture: but to me it conveys the idea that they are diminished, as if seen in perspective. I think his

¹ The poem may be found in Chalmers’s *British Poets*, vol. xvi., under the title *The Country Justice*. There the second line reads: “Perhaps that parent mourn’d her soldier slain.” John Langhorne (1735–1779) and his brother William made the translation of Plutarch’s *Lives* which, in spite of its dreary style, is still the one in general use.

² Alexander Nasmyth (1758–1840) painted in 1787 a bust portrait of Burns, which is the likeness most commonly reproduced.

countenance was more massive than it looks in any of the portraits. I should have taken the poet, had I not known what he was, for a very sagacious country farmer of the old Scotch school, *i. e.*, none of your modern agriculturists who keep laborers for their drudgery, but the *douce gudeman* who held his own plough. There was a strong expression of sense and shrewdness in all his lineaments; the eye alone, I think, indicated the poetical character and temperament. It was large, and of a dark cast, which glowed (I say literally *glowed*) when he spoke with feeling or interest. I never saw such another eye in a human head, though I have seen the most distinguished men of my time. His conversation expressed perfect self-confidence, without the slightest presumption. Among the men who were the most learned of their time and country, he expressed himself with perfect firmness, but without the least intrusive forwardness: and when he differed in opinion, he did not hesitate to express it firmly, yet at the same time with modesty. I do not remember any part of his conversation distinctly enough to be quoted; nor did I ever see him again, except in the street, where he did not recognize me, as I could not expect he should. He was much caressed in Edinburgh: but (considering what literary emoluments have been since his day) the efforts made for his relief were extremely trifling.

"I remember, on this occasion I mention, I thought Burns's acquaintance with English poetry was rather limited; and also that, having twenty times the abilities of Allan Ramsay and of Ferguson, he talked of them with too much humility as his models: there was doubtless national predilection in his estimate,

"This is all I can tell you about Burns. I have only to add, that his dress corresponded with his manner. He was like a farmer dressed in his best to dine with the laird. I do not speak *in malam partem*, when I say, I never saw a man in company with his superiors in station or information more perfectly free from either the reality or the affectation of embarrassment. I was told, but did not observe it, that his address to females was extremely deferential, and always with a turn either to the pathetic or humorous, which engaged their attention particularly. I have heard the late Duchess of Gordon remark this.—I do not know anything I can add to these recollections of forty years since."¹

The conduct of Burns under this dazzling blaze of favor; the calm, unaffected, manly manner in which he not only bore it, but estimated its value, has justly been regarded as the best proof that could be given of his real vigor and integrity of mind. A little natural vanity, some touches of hypocritical modesty, some glimmerings of affectation, at least some fear of being thought affected, we could have pardoned in almost any man; but no such indication is to be traced here. In his unexampled situation the young peasant is not a moment perplexed; so many strange lights do not confuse him, do not lead him astray. Nevertheless, we cannot but perceive that this winter did him great and lasting injury. A somewhat clearer knowledge of men's affairs, scarcely of their characters, it did afford him; but a sharper feeling of Fortune's unequal arrangements in their social destiny it also left with him. He had seen the gay and gorgeous arena, in which the powerful are born

¹ Quoted in Lockhart, chap. v.

to play their parts; nay had himself stood in the midst of it; and he felt more bitterly than ever, that here he was but a looker-on, and had no part or lot in that splendid game. From this time a jealous indignant fear of social degradation takes possession of him; and perverts, so far as aught could pervert, his private contentment, and his feelings towards his richer fellows. It was clear to Burns that he had talent enough to make a fortune, or a hundred fortunes, could he but have rightly willed this; it was clear also that he willed something far different, and therefore could not make one. Unhappy it was that he had not power to choose the one, and reject the other; but must halt forever between two opinions, two objects; making hampered advancement towards either. But so is it with many men: we “long for the merchandise, yet would fain keep the price;” and so stand chaffering with Fate in vexatious altercation, till the night come, and our fair is over!

The Edinburgh Learned of that period were in general more noted for clearness of head than for warmth of heart: with the exception of the good old Blacklock,¹ whose help was too ineffectual, scarcely one among them seems to have looked at Burns with any true sympathy, or indeed much otherwise than as at a highly curious *thing*. By the great also he is treated in the customary fashion; entertained at their

¹ Lockhart gives in a foot-note (at end of chap. iv.) the following quotation from a letter of Dr. Johnson to Mrs. Thrale, August 17, 1773:—

“This morning I saw at breakfast Dr. Blacklock, the blind poet, who does not remember to have seen light, and is read to by a poor scholar in Latin, Greek, and French. He was originally a poor scholar himself. I looked on him with reverence.”

tables and dismissed: certain modica of pudding and praise are, from time to time, gladly exchanged for the fascination of his presence; which exchange once effected, the bargain is finished, and each party goes his several way. At the end of this strange season, Burns gloomily sums up his gains and losses, and meditates on the chaotic future. In money he is somewhat richer; in fame and the show of happiness, infinitely richer; but in the substance of it, as poor as ever. Nay poorer; for his heart is now maddened still more with the fever of worldly Ambition; and through long years the disease will rack him with unprofitable sufferings, and weaken his strength for all true and nobler aims.

What Burns was next to do or to avoid; how a man so circumstanced was now to guide himself towards his true advantage, might at this point of time have been a question for the wisest. It was a question too, which apparently he was left altogether to answer for himself: of his learned or rich patrons it had not struck any individual to turn a thought on this so trivial matter. Without claiming for Burns the praise of perfect sagacity, we must say, that his Excise and Farm scheme does not seem to us a very unreasonable one; that we should be at a loss, even now, to suggest one decidedly better. Certain of his admirers have felt scandalized at his ever resolving to *gauge*; and would have had him lie at the pool, till the spirit of Patronage stirred the waters, that so, with one friendly plunge, all his sorrows might be healed.¹ Unwise counsellors! They know not the manner of this spirit; and how, in the lap of most golden dreams, a man might have happiness,

¹ Cf. John v. 1-9.

were it not that in the interim he must die of hunger! It reflects credit on the manliness and sound sense of Burns, that he felt so early on what ground he was standing; and preferred self-help, on the humblest scale, to dependence and inaction, though with hope of far more splendid possibilities. But even these possibilities were not rejected in his scheme: he might expect, if it chanced that he *had* any friend, to rise, in no long period, into something even like opulence and leisure: while again, if it chanced that he had no friend, he could still live in security; and for the rest, he "did not intend to borrow honor from any profession."¹ We reckon that his plan was honest and well-calculated: all turned on the execution of it. Doubtless it failed; yet not, we believe, from any vice inherent in itself.² Nay, after all, it was no failure of external means, but of internal, that overtook Burns. His was no bankruptcy of the purse,

¹ Words of Burns quoted in Lockhart, chap. vii.

² "If Burns had much of a farmer's skill, he had little of a farmer's prudence and economy. I once inquired of James Corrie, a sagacious old farmer, whose ground marched with Elliesland, the cause of the poet's failure. 'Faith,' said he, 'how could he miss but fail, when his servants ate the bread as fast as it was baked? I don't mean figuratively, I mean literally. Consider a little. At that time close economy was necessary to have enabled a man to clear twenty pounds a year by Elliesland. Now Burns's own handywork was out of the question; he neither ploughed, nor sowed, nor reaped, at least like a hard-working farmer; and then he had a bevy of servants from Ayrshire. The lasses did nothing but bake bread, and the lads sat by the fireside, and ate it warm, with ale. Waste of time and consumption of food would soon reach to twenty pounds a year.'" — (Letter to Lockhart from Allan Cunningham, quoted in Lockhart's *Life*, chap. vii.)

but of the soul; to his last day, he owed no man anything.¹

Meanwhile he begins well: with two good and wise actions. His donation to his mother, munificent from a man whose income had lately been seven pounds a-year, was worthy of him, and not more than worthy. Generous also, and worthy of him, was the treatment of the woman whose life's welfare now depended on his pleasure. A friendly observer might have hoped serene days for him: his mind is on the true road to peace with itself: what clearness he still wants will be given as he proceeds; for the best teacher of duties, that still lie dim to us, is the Practice of those we see and have at hand. Had the "patrons of genius," who could give him nothing, but taken nothing from him, at least nothing more! The wounds of his heart would have healed, vulgar ambition would have died away. Toil and frugality would have been welcome, since Virtue dwelt with them; and Poetry would have shone through them as of old: and in her clear ethereal light, which was his own by birthright, he might have looked down on his earthly destiny, and all its obstructions, not with patience only, but with love.

But the patrons of genius would not have it so. Picturesque tourists,² all manner of fashionable dan-

¹ In reality Burns occasionally borrowed money; but at his death he left only a few small debts.

² There is one little sketch by certain "English gentlemen" of this class, which, though adopted in Currie's narrative, and since then repeated in most others, we have all along felt an invincible disposition to regard as imaginary: "On a rock that projected into the stream, they saw a man employed in angling, of a singular appearance. He had a cap made of fox-skin on his head, a loose greatecoat fixed round him by a belt,

glers after literature, and, far worse, all manner of convivial Mæcenases,¹ hovered round him in his retreat; and his good as well as his weak qualities secured them influence over him. He was flattered by their notice; and his warm social nature made it impossible for him to shake them off, and hold on his way apart from them. These men, as we believe, were proximately the means of his ruin. Not that they meant him any ill; they only meant themselves a little good; if he suffered harm, let *him* look to it! But they wasted his precious time and his precious talent; they disturbed his composure, broke down his returning habits of temperance and assiduous contented exertion. Their pampering was baneful to him; their cruelty, which soon followed, was equally baneful. The old grudge against Fortune's inequality awoke with new bitterness in their neighborhood; and Burns had no retreat but to "the Rock of Inde-

from which depended an enormous Highland broad-sword. It was Burns." Now, we rather think, it was *not* Burns. For, to say nothing of the foxskin eap, the loose and quite Hibernian watchcoat with the belt, what are we to make of this "enormous Highland broad-sword" depending from him? More especially, as there is no word of parish constables on the outlook to see whether, as Dennis phrases it, he had an eye to his own midriff or that of the public! Burns, of all men, had the least need, and the least tendency, to seek for distinction, either in his own eyes or those of others, by such poor mummeries.—[Carlyle's note.]

Carlyle thinks this petty vanity inconsistent with Burns's wise self-control at Edinburgh. But we cannot reason thus in the case of a man with so variable a temperament, and the anecdote is fairly well authenticated.

¹ Mæcenas was the great literary patron of the Augustan age of Rome. Virgil addressed to him his *Georgics*, and Horace honors his name repeatedly.

pendence," which is but an air-castle after all, that looks well at a distance, but will screen no one from real wind and wet. Flushed with irregular excitement, exasperated alternately by contempt of others, and contempt of himself, Burns was no longer regaining his peace of mind, but fast losing it forever. There was a hollowness at the heart of his life, for his conscience did not now approve what he was doing.

Amid the vapors of unwise enjoyment, of bootless remorse, and angry discontent with Fate, his true loadstar, a life of Poetry, with Poverty, nay with Famine if it must be so, was too often altogether hidden from his eyes. And yet he sailed a sea, where without some such loadstar there was no right steering. Meteors of French Politics rise before him, but these were not *his* stars. An accident this, which hastened, but did not originate, his worst distresses. In the mad contentions of that time, he comes in collision with certain official Superiors; is wounded by them; cruelly lacerated, we should say, could a dead mechanical implement, in any case, be called cruel: and shrinks, in indignant pain, into deeper self-seclusion, into gloomier moodiness than ever. His life has now lost its unity: it is a life of fragments; led with little aim, beyond the melancholy one of securing its own continuance,—in fits of wild false joy when such offered, and of black despondency when they passed away. His character before the world begins to suffer: calumny is busy with him; for a miserable man makes more enemies than friends. Some faults he has fallen into, and a thousand misfortunes; but deep criminality is what he stands accused of, and they that are *not* without sin cast the first stone at

him! For is he not a well-wisher to the French Revolution, a Jacobin, and therefore in that one act guilty of all? These accusations, political and moral, it has since appeared, were false enough: but the world hesitated little to credit them.¹ Nay his convivial Mæcenases themselves were not the last to do it. There is reason to believe that, in his later years, the Dumfries Aristocracy had partly withdrawn themselves from Burns, as from a tainted person, no longer worthy of their acquaintance. That painful class, stationed, in all provincial cities, behind the outmost breastwork of Gentility, there to stand siege and do battle against the intrusions of Grocerdom and Grazierdom, had actually seen dishonor in the society of Burns, and branded him with their veto; had, as we vulgarly say, *cut him!* We find one passage in this Work of Mr. Lockhart's, which will not out of our thoughts:—

“A gentleman of that county, whose name I have already more than once had occasion to refer to, has often told me that he was seldom more grieved, than when riding into Dumfries one fine summer evening about this time to attend a county ball, he saw Burns walking alone, on the shady side of the principal street of the town, while the opposite side was gay with successive groups of gentlemen and ladies, all drawn together for the festivities of the night, not one of whom appeared willing to recognize him. The horseman dismounted, and joined Burns, who on his proposing to cross the street said: ‘Nay, nay, my young friend, that’s all over now;’ and quoted, after a pause, some verses of Lady Grizzel Baillie’s pathetic ballad:—

¹ Lockhart (chap. viii.) devotes much time to confuting them.

‘ His bonnet stood ance fu’ fair on his brow,
 His auld ane look’d better than mouy ane’s new ;
 But now he lets ’t wear ony way it will hing,
 And casts himsell dowie upon the corn-bing.

‘ O, were we young as we ance hae been,
 We sud hae been gallopping down on you green,
 And linking it ower the lily-white lea !
And werena my heart light, I wad die.’

It was little in Burns’s character to let his feelings on certain subjects escape in this fashion. He, immediately after reciting these verses, assumed the sprightliness of his most pleasing manner; and taking his young friend home with him, entertained him very agreeably till the hour of the ball arrived.”¹

Alas! when we think that Burns now sleeps “where bitter indignation can no longer lacerate his heart,”² and that most of those fair dames and frizzled gentlemen already lie at his side, where the breastwork of gentility is quite thrown down, — who would not sigh over the thin delusions and foolish toys that divide heart from heart, and make man unmerciful to his brother!

It was not now to be hoped that the genius of Burns would ever reach maturity, or accomplish aught worthy of itself. His spirit was jarred in its melody; not the soft breath of natural feeling, but the rude hand of Fate, was now sweeping over the strings. And yet what harmony was in him, what music even in his discords! How the wild tones had a charm for the simplest and the wisest; and all men felt and knew that here also was one of the Gifted! “If he

¹ Lockhart, chap. viii.

² *Ubi sæva indignatio cor ulterius lacerare nequit.* Swift’s Epitaph. [Carlyle’s note.]

entered an inn at midnight, after all the inmates were in bed, the news of his arrival circulated from the cellar to the garret; and ere ten minutes had elapsed, the landlord and all his guests were assembled!" Some brief pure moments of poetic life were yet appointed him, in the composition of his Songs. We can understand how he grasped at this employment; and how, too, he spurned all other reward for it but what the labor itself brought him. For the soul of Burns, though scathed and marred, was yet living in its full moral strength, though sharply conscious of its errors and abasement; and here, in his destitution and degradation, was one act of seeming nobleness and self-devotedness left even for him to perform. He felt, too, that with all the "thoughtless follies" that had "laid him low,"¹ the world was unjust and cruel to him; and he silently appealed to another and calmer time. Not as a hired soldier, but as a patriot, would he strive for the glory of his country: so he cast from him the poor sixpence a-day, and served zealously as a volunteer. Let us not grudge him this last luxury of his existence; let him not have appealed to us in vain! The money was not necessary to him; he struggled through without it: long since, these guineas would have been gone, and now the high-mindedness of refusing them will plead for him in all hearts forever.

We are here arrived at the crisis of Burns's life; for matters had now taken such a shape with him as could not long continue. If improvement was not to be looked for, Nature could only for a limited time maintain this dark and maddening warfare against the world and itself. We are not medically informed

¹ *A Bard's Epitaph.*

whether any continuance of years was, at this period, probable for Burns; whether his death is to be looked on as in some sense an accidental event, or only as the natural consequence of the long series of events that had preceded. The latter seems to be the likelier opinion; and yet it is by no means a certain one. At all events, as we have said, *some* change could not be very distant. Three gates of deliverance, it seems to us, were open for Burns: clear poetical activity; madness; or death. The first, with longer life, was still possible, though not probable; for physical causes were beginning to be concerned in it: and yet Burns had an iron resolution; could he but have seen and felt, that not only his highest glory, but his first duty, and the true medicine for all his woes, lay here. The second was still less probable; for his mind was ever among the clearest and firmest. So the milder third gate was opened for him: and he passed, not softly yet speedily, into that still country, where the hail-storms and fire-showers do not reach, and the heaviest-laden wayfarer at length lays down his load!

Contemplating this sad end of Burns, and how he sank unaided by any real help, uncheered by any wise sympathy, generous minds have sometimes figured to themselves, with a reproachful sorrow, that much might have been done for him; that by counsel, true affection and friendly ministrations, he might have been saved to himself and the world. We question whether there is not more tenderness of heart than soundness of judgment in these suggestions. It seems dubious to us whether the richest, wisest, most benevolent individual could have lent Burns any effectual help. Counsel, which seldom profits any one,

he did not need; in his understanding, he knew the right from the wrong, as well perhaps as any man ever did; but the persuasion, which would have availed him, lies not so much in the head as in the heart, where no argument or expostulation could have assisted much to implant it. As to money again, we do not believe that this was his essential want; or well see how any private man could, even presupposing Burns's consent, have bestowed on him an independent fortune, with much prospect of decisive advantage. It is a mortifying truth, that two men, in any rank of society, could hardly be found virtuous enough to give money, and to take it as a necessary gift, without injury to the moral entireness of one or both. But so stands the fact: Friendship, in the old heroic sense of that term, no longer exists; except in the cases of kindred or other legal affinity, it is in reality no longer expected, or recognized as a virtue among men. A close observer of manners has pronounced "Patronage," that is, pecuniary or other economic furtherance, to be "twice cursed;" cursing him that gives, and him that takes!¹ And thus, in regard to outward matters also, it has become the rule, as in regard to inward it always was and must be the rule, that no one shall look for effectual help to another; but that each shall rest contented with what help he can afford himself. Such, we say, is the principle of modern Honor; naturally enough growing out of that sentiment of Pride, which we inculcate and encourage as the basis of our whole social morality. Many a poet has been poorer than Burns; but no one was ever prouder: we may question whether, without great precautions, even a pension

¹ The parody is from *The Merchant of Venice*, iv. 1.

from Royalty would not have galled and encumbered, more than actually assisted him.

Still less, therefore, are we disposed to join with another class of Burns's admirers, who accuse the higher ranks among us of having ruined Burns by their selfish neglect of him. We have already stated our doubts whether direct pecuniary help, had it been offered, would have been accepted, or could have proved very effectual. We shall readily admit, however, that much was to be done for Burns; that many a poisoned arrow might have been warded from his bosom; many an entanglement in his path cut asunder by the hand of the powerful; and light and heat, shed on him from high places, would have made his humble atmosphere more genial; and the softest heart then breathing might have lived and died with some fewer pangs. Nay, we shall grant farther, and for Burns it is granting much, that, with all his pride, he would have thanked, even with exaggerated gratitude, any one who had cordially befriended him: patronage, unless once cursed, needed not to have been twice so. At all events, the poor promotion he desired in his calling might have been granted: it was his own scheme, therefore likelier than any other to be of service. All this it might have been a luxury, nay it was a duty, for our nobility to have done. No part of all this, however, did any of them do; or apparently attempt, or wish to do: so much is granted against them. But what then is the amount of their blame? Simply that they were men of the world, and walked by the principles of such men; that they treated Burns, as other nobles and other commoners had done other poets; as the English did Shakespeare; as King Charles and his Cavaliers did But-

ler,¹ as King Philip and his Grandees did Cervantes. Do men gather grapes of thorns;² or shall we cut down our thorns for yielding only a *fence* and haws? How, indeed, could the “nobility and gentry of his native land” hold out any help to this “Scottish Bard, proud of his name and country”?³ Were the nobility and gentry so much as able rightly to help themselves? Had they not their game to preserve; their borough interests to strengthen; dinners, therefore, of various kinds to eat and give? Were their means more than adequate to all this business, or less than adequate? Less than adequate, in general; few of them in reality were richer than Burns; many of them were poorer; for sometimes they had to wring their supplies, as with thumbscrews, from the hard hand; and, in their need of guineas, to forget their duty of mercy; which Burns was never reduced to do. Let us pity and forgive them. The game they preserved and shot, the dinners they ate and gave, the borough interests they strengthened, the *little Babylons* they severally builded by the glory of their might,⁴ are all melted or melting back into the primeval Chaos, as man’s merely selfish endeavors are fated to do: and here was an action, extending, in virtue of its worldly influence, we may say, through all time; in virtue of its moral nature, beyond all time, being immortal as the Spirit of Goodness itself; this action was offered them to do, and light was not given

¹ Cf. page 1, above.

² Cf. Matthew vii. 16.

³ An echo from Burns’s dedication to the first Edinburgh edition of his poems. Cf. page 3, above.

⁴ Cf. Daniel iv. 30.

them to do it. Let us pity and forgive them. But better than pity, let us go and *do otherwise*. Human suffering did not end with the life of Burns; neither was the solemn mandate, "Love one another, bear one another's burdens,"¹ given to the rich only, but to all men. True, we shall find no Burns to relieve, to assuage by our aid or our pity; but celestial natures, groaning under the fardels of a weary life, we shall still find; and that wretchedness which Fate has rendered *voiceless* and *tuneless* is not the least wretched, but the most.²

Still we do not think that the blame of Burns's failure lies chiefly with the world. The world, it seems to us, treated him with more rather than with less kindness than it usually shows to such men. It has ever, we fear, shown but small favor to its Teachers: hunger and nakedness, perils and revilings, the prison, the cross, the poison-chalice have, in most times and countries, been the market-price it has offered for Wisdom, the welcome with which it has greeted those who have come to enlighten and purify it. Homer and Socrates, and the Christian Apostles, belong to old days; but the world's Martyrology was not completed with these. Roger Bacon and Galileo languish in priestly dungeons; Tasso pines in the cell of a madhouse; Camoens dies begging on the streets of Lisbon.³ So neglected, so "persecuted they the

¹ The first half of this precept occurs eight times in the New Testament; the second only in Galatians vi. 2.

² This cry of indignation at the absorption of men in the cares of this world, and their indifference to higher things, occurs repeatedly in Carlyle.

³ Every reader should have a clear idea, not necessarily of the details in the lives of these men, but of the general significance of each in the history of the world.

Prophets,"¹ not in Judea only, but in all places where men have been. We reckon that every poet of Burns's order is, or should be, a prophet and teacher to his age; that he has no right to expect great kindness from it, but rather is bound to do it great kindness; that Burns, in particular, experienced fully the usual proportion of the world's goodness; and that the blame of his failure, as we have said, lies not chiefly with the world.

Where, then, does it lie? We are forced to answer: With himself; it is his inward, not his outward, misfortunes that bring him to the dust. Seldom, indeed, is it otherwise; seldom is a life morally wrecked but the grand cause lies in some internal mal-arrangement, some want less of good fortune than of good guidance. Nature fashions no creature without implanting in it the strength needful for its action and duration; least of all does she so neglect her masterpiece and darling, the poetic soul. Neither can we believe that it is in the power of *any* external circumstances utterly to ruin the mind of a man; nay, if proper wisdom be given him, even so much as to affect its essential health and beauty. The sternest sum-total of all worldly misfortunes is Death; nothing more *can* lie in the cup of human woe: yet many men, in all ages, have triumphed over Death, and led it captive;² converting its physical victory into a moral victory for themselves, into a seal and immortal consecration for all that their past life had achieved. What has been done, may be done again: nay it is but the degree and not the kind of such heroism that differs in different seasons; for without

¹ Matthew v. 12; and compare Luke vi. 23.

² There is an allusion to Ephesians iv. 8.

some portion of this spirit, not of boisterous daring, but of silent fearlessness, of Self-denial in all its forms, no good man, in any scene or time, has ever attained to be good.¹.

We have already stated the error of Burns; and mourned over it, rather than blamed it. It was the want of unity in his purposes, of consistency in his aims; the hapless attempt to mingle in friendly union the common spirit of the world with the spirit of poetry, which is of a far different and altogether irreconcilable nature. Burns was nothing wholly, and Burns could be nothing, no man formed as he was can be anything, by halves. The heart, not of a mere hot-blooded, popular Verse-monger, or poetical *Restaurateur*,² but of a true Poet and Singer, worthy of the old religious heroic times, had been given him: and he fell in an age, not of heroism and religion, but of scepticism, selfishness, and triviality, when true Nobleness was little understood, and its place supplied by a hollow, dissocial, altogether barren and unfruitful principle of Pride. The influences of that age, his open, kind, susceptible nature, to say nothing of his highly untoward situation, made it more than usually difficult for him to cast aside, or rightly subordinate; the better spirit that was within him ever sternly demanded its rights, its supremacy: he spent his life in endeavoring to reconcile these two; and lost it, as he must lose it, without reconciling them.

¹ This moral is worked out with wonderful power in *Sartor Resartus*.

² The word means simply *restorer*; but Carlyle uses it to denote a man who uses his literary talent merely to give amusement, not to inculcate truth. Here again is a veiled sneer at Byron and Scott.

Burns was born poor; and born also to continue poor, for he would not endeavor to be otherwise: this it had been well could he have once for all admitted, and considered as finally settled. He was poor, truly; but hundreds even of his own class and order of minds have been poorer, yet have suffered nothing deadly from it: nay his own Father had a far sorcer battle with ungrateful destiny than his was; and he did not yield to it, but died courageously warring, and to all moral intents prevailing, against it. True, Burns had little means, had even little time for poetry, his only real pursuit and vocation; but so much the more precious was what little he had. In all these external respects his ease was hard; but very far from the hardest. Poverty, incessant drudgery and much worse evils, it has often been the lot of Poets and wise men to strive with, and their glory to conquer. Locke was banished as a traitor; and wrote his "Essay on the Human Understanding" sheltering himself in a Dutch garret. Was Milton rich or at his ease when he composed "Paradise Lost"? Not only low, but fallen from a height; not only poor, but impoverished; in darkness and with dangers compassed round, he sang his immortal song, and found fit audience, though few.¹ Did not Cervantes finish his work, a maimed soldier and in prison? Nay, was not the "Araucana,"² which Spain acknowledges as its Epic, written without even the aid of paper; on

¹ See *Paradise Lost*, vii. 24-31.

² The *Araucana* is the best of a score of epics written in the reign of Philip II. of Spain in imitation of the Italian poets Ariosto and Tasso. Its author, Alonso de Ercilla y Zuñiga (1533-1595), writes of the Spanish campaigns against the Indians of Arauco, in which he himself took part. The early part

seraps of leather, as the stout fighter and voyager snatched any moment from that wild warfare?

And what, then, had these men, which Burns wanted? Two things; both which, it seems to us, are indispensable for such men. They had a true, religious principle of morals; and a single, not a double aim in their activity. They were not self-seekers and self-worshippers; but seekers and worshippers of something far better than Self. Not personal enjoyment was their object; but a high, heroic idea of Religion, of Patriotism, of heavenly Wisdom, in one or the other form, ever hovered before them; in which cause they neither shrank from suffering, nor called on the earth to witness it as something wonderful; but patiently endured, counting it blessedness enough so to spend and be spent. Thus the “golden-calf of Self-love,” however curiously carved, was not their Deity; but the Invisible Goodness, which alone is man’s reasonable service. This feeling was as a celestial fountain, whose streams refreshed into gladness and beauty all the provinces of their otherwise too desolate existence. In a word, they willed one thing, to which all other things were subordinated and made subservient; and therefore they accomplished it. The wedge will rend rocks; but its edge must be sharp and single: if it be double, the wedge is bruised in pieces and will rend nothing.

Part of this superiority these men owed to their age; in which heroism and devotedness were still practised, or at least not yet disbelieved in; but much of it likewise they owed to themselves. With of the poem was written in the field, in the manner that Carlyle describes. The *Araucana* is now little read; and its author is no way comparable to the great epic poets of Italy and England.

Burns, again, it was different. His morality, in most of its practical points, is that of a mere worldly man; enjoyment, in a finer or coarser shape, is the only thing he longs and strives for. A noble instinct sometimes raises him above this; but an instinct only, and acting only for moments. He has no Religion; in the shallow age, where his days were cast, Religion was not discriminated from the New and Old Light *forms* of Religion; and was, with these, becoming obsolete in the minds of men. His heart, indeed, is alive with a trembling adoration, but there is no temple in his understanding. He lives in darkness and in the shadow of doubt. His religion, at best, is an anxious wish; like that of Rabelais, "a great Perhaps."

He loved Poetry warmly, and in his heart; could he but have loved it purely, and with his whole undivided heart, it had been well. For Poetry, as Burns could have followed it, is but another form of Wisdom, of Religion: is itself Wisdom and Religion. But this also was denied him. His poetry is a stray vagrant gleam, which will not be extinguished within him, yet rises not to be the true light of his path, but is often a wildfire that misleads him. It was not necessary for Burns to be rich, to be, or to seem, "independent;" but it *was* necessary for him to be at one with his own heart; to place what was highest in his nature highest also in his life; "to seek within himself for that consistency and sequence, which external events would forever refuse him." He was born a poet; poetry was the celestial element of his being, and should have been the soul of his whole endeavors. Lifted into that serene ether, whither he had wings given him to mount, he would have needed

no other elevation: poverty, neglect, and all evil, save the desecration of himself and his Art, were a small matter to him; the pride and the passions of the world lay far beneath his feet; and he looked down alike on noble and slave, on prince and beggar, and all that wore the stamp of man, with clear recognition, with brotherly affection, with sympathy, with pity. Nay, we question whether for his culture as a Poet poverty and much suffering for a season were not absolutely advantageous. Great men, in looking back over their lives, have testified to that effect. "I would not for much," says Jean Paul, "that I had been born richer." And yet Paul's birth was poor enough; for, in another place, he adds: "The prisoner's allowance is bread and water; and I had often only the latter."¹ But the gold that is refined in the hottest furnace comes out the purest; or, as he has himself expressed it, "the canary-bird sings sweeter the longer it has been trained in a darkened cage."

A man like Burns might have divided his hours between poetry and virtuous industry; industry which all true feeling sanctions, nay prescribes, and which has a beauty, for that cause, beyond the pomp of thrones: but to divide his hours between poetry and rich men's banquets was an ill-starred and inauspicious attempt. How could he be at ease at such banquets? What had he to do there, mingling his music

¹ Jean Paul Friedrich Richter (1763–1825) is one of Carlyle's favorite authors, and one of those who influenced him most. He is the subject of Carlyle's first essay in the *Edinburgh Review* (1827), and is treated again in another and a greater essay in the *Foreign Review* (1830). These two papers by Carlyle remain among the best accounts of Richter accessible in English.

with the coarse roar of altogether earthly voices; brightening the thick smoke of intoxication with fire lent him from heaven? Was it his aim to *enjoy* life! To-morrow he must go drudge as an Exciseman! We wonder not that Burns became moody, indignant, and at times an offender against certain rules of society; but rather that he did not grow utterly frantic, and run *amuck* against them all. How could a man, so falsely placed, by his own or others' fault, ever know contentment or peaceable diligence for an hour? What he did, under such perverse guidance, and what he forbore to do, alike fill us with astonishment at the natural strength and worth of his character.

Doubtless there was a remedy for this perverseness; but not in others; only in himself; least of all in simple increase of wealth and worldly "respectability." We hope we have now heard enough about the efficacy of wealth for poetry, and to make poets happy. Nay, have we not seen another instance of it in these very days? Byron, a man of an endowment considerably less ethereal than that of Burns, is born in the rank not of a Scottish ploughman, but of an English peer: the highest worldly honors, the fairest worldly career, are his by inheritance; the richest harvest of fame he soon reaps, in another province, by his own hand. And what does all this avail him? Is he happy, is he good, is he true? Alas, he has a poet's soul, and strives towards the Infinite and the Eternal; and soon feels that all this is but mounting to the housetop to reach the stars! Like Burns, he is only a proud man; might, like him, have "purchased a pocket-copy of Milton to study the character of Satan;" for Satan is also Byron's grand exemplar, the hero of his poetry, and

the model apparently of his conduct.¹ As in Burns's case too, the celestial element will not mingle with the clay of earth; both poet and man of the world he must not be; vulgar Ambition will not live kindly with poetic Adoration; he *cannot* serve God and Mammon. Byron, like Burns, is not happy; nay he is the most wretched of all men. His life is falsely arranged: the fire that is in him is not a strong, still, central fire, warming into beauty the products of a world; but it is the mad fire of a volcano; and now—we look sadly into the ashes of a crater, which ere long will fill itself with snow!

Byron and Burns were sent forth as missionaries to their generation, to teach it a higher Doctrine, a purer Truth; they had a message to deliver, which left them no rest till it was accomplished; in dim throes of pain, this divine behest lay smouldering within them; for they knew not what it meant, and felt it only in mysterious anticipation, and they had to die without articulately uttering it. They are in the camp of the Unconverted; yet not as high messengers of rigorous though benignant truth, but as soft flattering singers, and in pleasant fellowship will they live there: they are first adulated, then persecuted; they accomplish little for others; they find no peace for themselves, but only death and the peace of the grave. We confess, it is not without a certain mournful awe that we view the fate of these noble

¹ "I have bought a pocket Milton, which I carry perpetually about me, in order to study the sentiments, the dauntless magnanimity, the intrepid unyielding independence, the desperate daring, and noble defiance of hardship in that great personage — Satan." — Letter of Burns, quoted in Lockhart, chap. vi.

Bitter epigrams like this on Byron become a characteristic of Carlyle's style in his later writings.

souls, so richly gifted, yet ruined to so little purpose with all their gifts. It seems to us there is a stern moral taught in this piece of history, — *twice* told us in our own time! Surely to men of like genius, if there be any such, it carries with it a lesson of deep impressive significance. Surely it would become such a man, furnished for the highest of all enterprises, that of being the Poet of his Age, to consider well what it is that he attempts, and in what spirit he attempts it. For the words of Milton are true in all times, and were never truer than in this: “He who would write heroic poems must make his whole life a heroic poem.”¹ If he cannot first so make his life, then let him hasten from this arena; for neither its lofty glories, nor its fearful perils, are fit for him. Let him dwindle into a modish balladmonger; let him worship and besing the idols of the time, and the time will not fail to reward him. If, indeed, he can endure to live in that capacity! Byron and Burns could not live as idol-priests, but the fire of their own hearts consumed them; and better it was for them that they could not. For it is not in the favor of the great or of the small, but in a life of truth, and in the inexpugnable citadel of his own soul, that a Byron’s or a Burns’s strength must lie. Let the great stand aloof from him, or know how to reverence him. Beautiful is the union of wealth with favor

¹ Milton’s real words are: “I was confirmed in this opinion, that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem; that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honourablest things; not presuming to sing high praises of heroie men, or famous cities, unless he has in himself the experience and the practice of all that which is praiseworthy.” — *Apology for Smectymnuus.*

and furtherance for literature; like the costliest flower-jar enclosing the loveliest amaranth. Yet let not the relation be mistaken. A true poet is not one whom they can hire by money or flattery to be a minister of their pleasures; their writer of occasional verses, their purveyor of table-wit; he cannot be their menial, he cannot even be their partisan. At the peril of both parties, let no such union be attempted! Will a Courser of the Sun work softly in the harness of a Dray-horse? His hoofs are of fire, and his path is through the heavens, bringing light to all lands; will he lumber on mud highways, dragging ale for earthly appetites from door to door?

But we must stop short in these considerations, which would lead us to boundless lengths. We had something to say on the public moral character of Burns; but this also we must forbear. We are far from regarding him as guilty before the world, as guiltier than the average; nay from doubting that he is less guilty than one of ten thousand. Tried at a tribunal far more rigid than that where the *Plebisita* of common civic reputations are pronounced, he has seemed to us even there less worthy of blame than of pity and wonder. But the world is habitually unjust in its judgments of such men; unjust on many grounds, of which this one may be stated as the substance: It decides, like a court of law, by dead statutes; and not positively but negatively, less on what is done right, than on what is or is not done wrong. Not the few inches of deflection from the mathematical orbit, which are so easily measured, but the *ratio* of these to the whole diameter, constitutes the real aberration. This orbit may be a planet's, its diameter the breadth of the solar system; or it may be a

city hippodrome; nay the circle of a ginhorse, its diameter a score of feet or paces. But the inches of deflection only are measured: and it is assumed that the diameter of the ginhorse, and that of the planet, will yield the same ratio when compared with them! Here lies the root of many a blind, cruel condemnation of Burnses, Swifts, Rousseaus, which one never listens to with approval. Granted, the ship comes into harbor with shrouds and tackle damaged; the pilot is blameworthy; he has not been all-wise and all-powerful: but to know *how* blameworthy, tell us first whether his voyage has been round the Globe, or only to Ramsgate and the Isle of Dogs.¹

With our readers in general, with men of right feeling anywhere, we are not required to plead for Burns. In pitying admiration he lies enshrined in all our hearts, in a far nobler mausoleum than that one of marble; neither will his Works, even as they are, pass away from the memory of men. While the Shakespeares and Miltons roll on like mighty rivers through the country of Thought, bearing fleets of traffickers and assiduous pearl-fishers on their waves; this little Valelusa² Fountain will also arrest our eye: for this also is of Nature's own and most cunning workmanship, bursts from the depths of the earth, with a full gushing current, into the light of day; and often will the traveller turn aside to drink of its clear waters, and muse among its rocks and pines.

¹ Shipping ports in southern England. Carlyle is writing from the point of view of a Scotchman.

² *Vaucluse* (*Valclusa* in Italian) is a town in southeast France where the great Italian poet Petrarch (1304–1374) lived for some time, and where he did much of his best work. Its fountain is celebrated in his poems.

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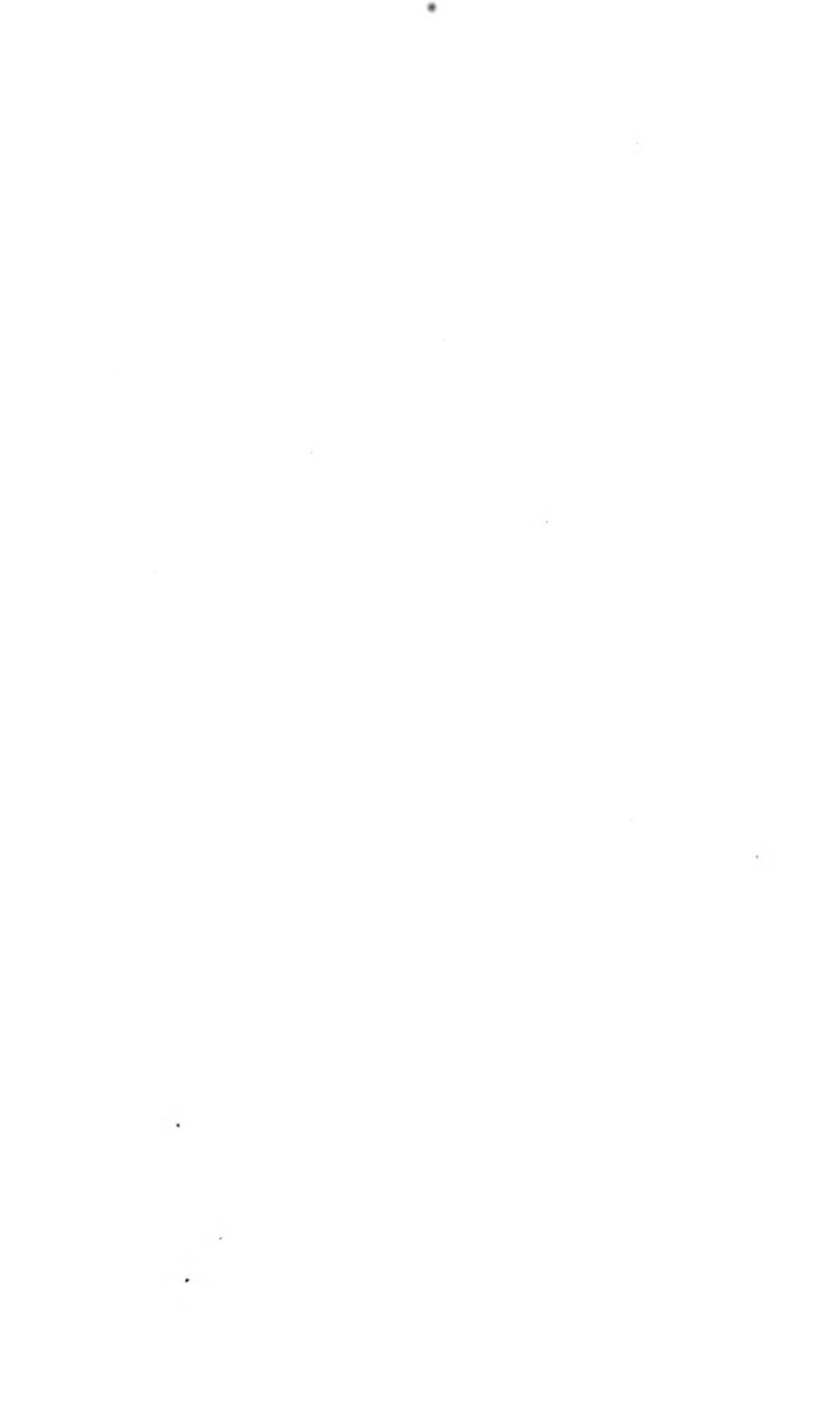
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